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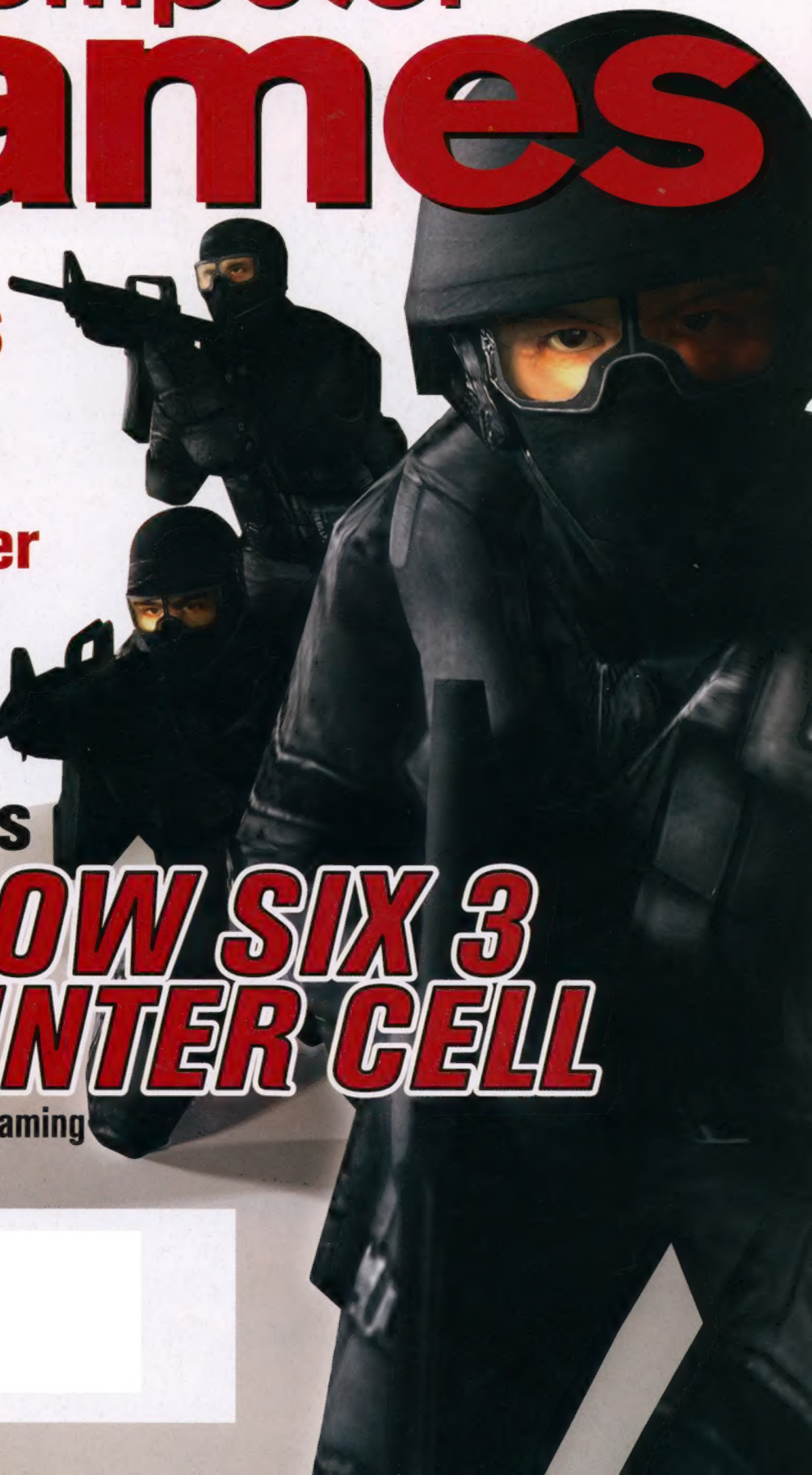

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NO. 144 / NOVEMBER 2002

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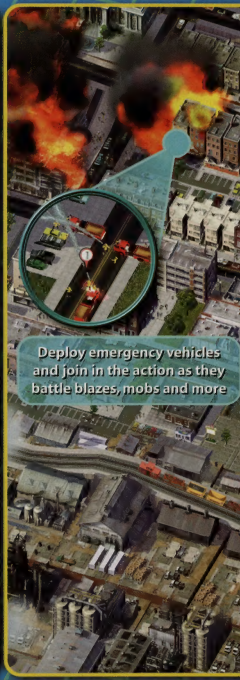


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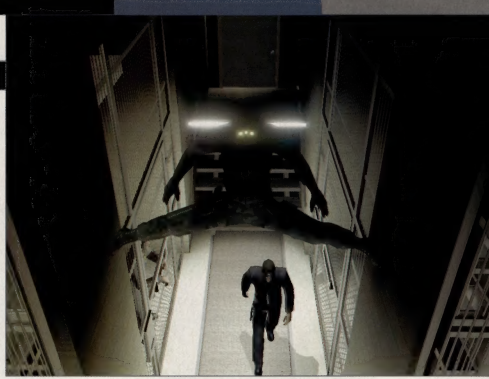

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## THIS MONTH'S DEMO CD

**Cate Archer is Hot**

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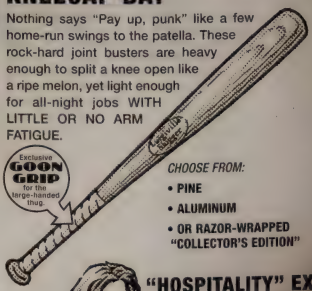


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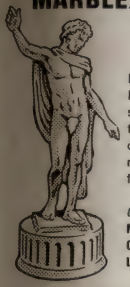

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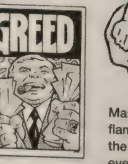


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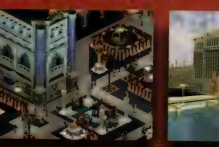

PC CD-ROM

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STEVE BAUMAN

# upfront

## chicks dig the long ball

**Being a singles hitter in a home run world isn't cool, or where are the equivalents of indie bands and films in the game industry?**

**So I was** on the phone one day speaking with a "world famous game developer" (who shall remain nameless but tends to contribute a column every month to a magazine with the initials C, G, and M) when the topic of "budget" games came up. I think all developers should consider running multiple teams, with one devoted to pumping out smaller, cheaper games. It diversifies their lineup, doesn't put all of their eggs in one basket, and the extra practice and experience might help improve efficiency and lead to tighter development schedules on the bigger games. But P.S., as we'll call him, mentioned that he didn't want to work on any of those kinds of games because he feels those smaller titles, with their shorter development cycles and lower production values, take some of the prestige away from his bigger, and presumably better, games.

Despite him knowing a lot more about this kind of thing than I do, my knee-jerk reaction was, "Well boo hoo." From here in the cheap seats, it sometimes seems that every person in the production chain, from the greedy, hit-driven publishers to the fame-worshipping developers, is overly committed to producing large-scale, big budget, high-risk/high-reward games. It's all about homers, not singles. And chicks dig the long ball.

> "...it sometimes seems that every person in the production chain, from the greedy, hit-driven publishers to the fame-worshipping developers, is overly committed to producing large-scale, big budget, high-risk/high-reward games."

Consumers encourage this. We've developed an insatiable desire for the home run, or the big event with all of its ancillary fun: the Happy Meal tie-in, the theme park ride, and the kitschy toy. We want the flash, the chrome, and the big effects, and it's led to disposable entertainment designed to be consumed and forgotten in one week.

In general, Hollywood does a decent job balancing low- and high-budget movies, though the number of "event" movies increases every year. For every few "Adventures of Pluto Nash"-level disasters you get a "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," the surprise low-budget hit movie equivalent of a *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. The music industry also manages a two-tiered structure that works both in a business and listener sense. Just as independent filmmakers do things like adhere to the "Dogme 95" manifesto (it's Danish for "bad lighting") to retain a sense of naturalism in film, the indie and garage rock movements are all about primitive recording and raw sounds. Even a cursory listen reveals an enormous difference between the way a Creed and White Stripes CD sounds.

But in the game industry, everyone expects every product to have the production values of a Blizzard game. Where's the "Dogme 95," the SubPop, the Kill Rock Stars, or the pre-Disney Miramax? Instead, we get "edgy" pseudo-indie labels from the major publishers. We need developers and publishers who can pump out high-quality, low budget games efficiently, ones where risks can be taken in content and topic, and we need to embrace them despite any and all of their limitations. That doesn't mean we need to accept poor quality, because low budgets shouldn't force a developer to compromise that nebulous "playability." We just need to quit fixating on anal-retentive details. Is it number of levels or quality that's most important? Are a few repeating or misaligned textures a sign of the end of the world?

With games, there's no prestige associated with lower budgets like there is in other entertainment. Without a distinct two-tier structure—an artistically valid "haves" versus "have-nots"—where's the snobbery for the budding game aesthetes? There's nothing fringe to admire, forcing people like this to be content with whining about the "good old days." And it's just no fun to root for those who have the resources to throw tons of money at any project. Anticipating the next $20 million videogame is like looking forward to the new Mariah Carey CD instead of the one from Sleater-Kinney. You may like the slick, highly-produced, and market-researched-to-death CD/movie/game, but we all know it rarely has soul or heart because with increased risk from higher budgets comes a brand of conservatism that leads to inoffensiveness and blandness, and god knows we don't need more of that in this world. ●

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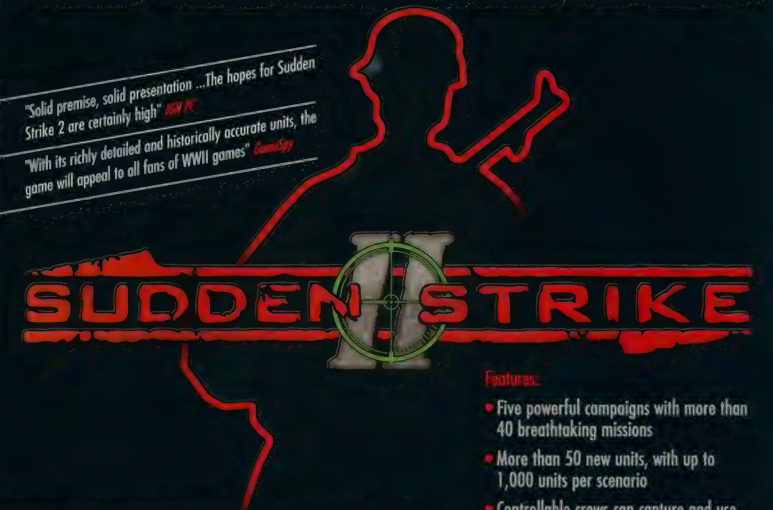


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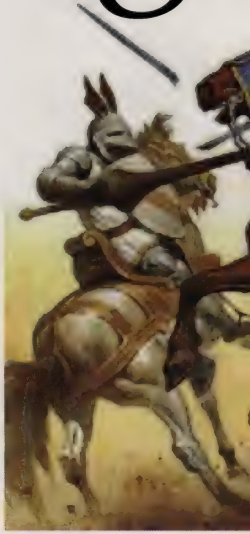
# dueling

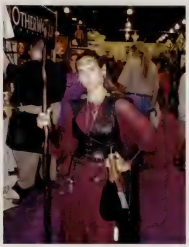
## Farewell Milwaukee

Gen Con 2002: The ultimate role-playing convention is all about scary Monsters, super creeps, and lots of geeks

by Andrew S. Bub



**It's 10am** on August 8th 2002 in Milwaukee Wisconsin, and the doors to Gen Con finally open to the public. A flood of gamers rushes into the Midwest Express Center and promptly clog the few escalators going up. It's gridlock. It's uncomfortable, but the crowd is exhilarated to be here. You can feel it. Ahead on the escalator is a twenty year-old woman with plastic elf ears and a chain mail bikini top. Her posture is bad, her hair is greasy, her plastic ears are coming unglued from the heat, but you can see in her eyes that, today, she's a beautiful elf-princess. At the bottom of the escalator, two older men in Klingon costumes argue about rules minutia from some wargame. From the sound of things, these Klingons know their Napoleonic strategy. Another guy nearby is wearing a Homer Simpson T-shirt. Homer's face (saying "Doh!") is painfully stretched on the faded cotton.



This is Gen Con. There are Wargamers, pen and paper role-players, *Star Wars* geeks, Trekkers, Comic Book Guys, and fans of all things anime, all packed in like sardines. They've brought their games, supplements, and miniatures with them in briefcases and backpacks, and their pockets bulge with spiky dice. They live in imaginary worlds. They can be a little scary, but overall, they're decent people, and in remarkably good spirits despite the hour, the gridlock, and the oppressive atmosphere. The Midwest Express Center's air-conditioning system is struggling against the heat, humidity, and the pungent odor of unwashed gamers, and it's barely getting by.

### Look back, wistfully

Gen Con's been a Wisconsin staple for 35 years now. It first appeared in Lake Geneva, the old headquarters of TSR and home to *D&D* co-creator E. Gary Gygax, where it hosted a little over 100 people the first year. Later it moved to Racine, which is about halfway between Milwaukee and Chicago, and then in the '80s it moved to Milwaukee. The show hosts, on average, thirty-fifty thousand gamers over a four-day period. On the bottom floor there is a massive art gallery and an auction hall where veteran game designer and raconteur Tom Wham (*King of the Tabletop*, *Iron Dragon*) helps people buy and sell their old games. Level three has two massive halls, one for tournaments ranging from *Magic: The Gathering*, *D&D 3rd Edition*, to recreating the great battles of Napoleon and *Battletech's* Clan wars and the other hall is home to retailers, game studios and computer games. Microsoft, Infogrames, Sony and THQ all had massive booths this year while Ubisoft, Westwood, and Simon & Schuster settled for more humble digs. The *Wizards of the Coast* Castle, where live exhibitions of *D&D*, *Magic*, and other games take place, dominates the main hall,

continued on page 24

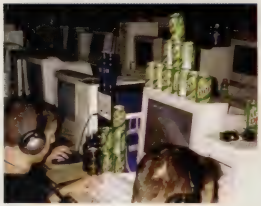
# Same Game, Different Year

## Live from the announcer's booth at QuakeCon 2002, a four-day deathmatcher's heaven

by Kevin Rice

**Welcome back**, frag fans! I'm Pat Summ3r@ll and with me as usual is J0hn Madd3n. It's time for another fun filled four days of sweat, Mountain Dew, and carpal tunnel syndrome as we kick off this year's QuakeCon 2002. It's bigger than ever this year, with over 4,000 attendees and plenty of combatants ready to strut their stuff.

That's right, Pat. Of course, there's no competition without some help from our sponsors and with two competitions going this year, the money at the end is worth the wrist brace.



The emphasis is still on the venerable *Quake III Arena*, but before we can get to the big show, we'll have to sit in on John Carmack's speech. This year, the id Software presentation starts off with an hour long demonstration of the tools being used to create *Doom III*. We're being shown just how powerful their editor is, with many of the components being drag-and-drop compatible.

Pat, this means that mod makers around the world will be busy on day one of this game's launch. Not only are many of the confusing aspects of making BSP files and lighting effects all but removed, the editor is actually built into the game. Players can open the console, type "editor," and boom! They have the same tools the professionals use to make this incredible looking game. With potential like this, half the game will be actually using the editor.

True, John, but we're really here for the fight, and it's about to begin! Although it looked like fatal1ty (last year's second place winner) was going to the top once more, he was taken out by *69|Daler (Sean Price) who will be facing M19*LeXeR (Alexei Nesterov), for the big $20,000 check. It's about to begin, so let's get a good seat and watch the warm-ups.

Both of them seem to be on their game, Pat. The map they've selected (Q3DM6—The Camping Grounds) isn't a particular favorite of mine, but both seem to know their way around it quite well. Rocket launcher shots around corners, lightning gun accuracy, pinpoint railgun shooting—this should be an event that's worth the wait.

### The screen says "Fight!" and it's go time!

I haven't seen concentrated movement like this since...

Oh! Sorry, Pat. LeXeR just painted the wall with Daler's innards there, and it's a quick one to the—Ow!—make that a two to nothing lead for LeXeR. He's really deadly with that lightning gun and he's

continued on page 26

CONS

## Farewell Milwaukee continued

as it does every year. At the rear there's an autograph booth where patrons line up to meet Warwick Davis (*Willow*, *Return of the Jedi*), the guy who played Neelix in *Star Trek Voyager*, and a few other "B" celebrities.

The rest of the convention houses the all-important "empty rooms with tables" and the "red curtained cubicles" in the nearby Bradley Center (where the Milwaukee Bucks play). This is where friends and strangers set up their own games and play all day. The Con even lets them

play all night and sleep there, surrounded by dice and graph paper, if they wish (and they do).

### Over the hills and far away

Yea verily, the famed Gen Con did returneth to Milwaukee in August of 2002, but it shan't return next year. After the escalator got moving again, we reached the 3rd floor and we were faced with a large Indianapolis Tourism booth just across from the main hall. The Con is leaving, and the reason is because the Con is growing to quickly and Milwaukee simply lacks the needed hotel space.

"It's sad to see it go, but the fans will still come to Indianapolis," says Sandy Petersen, *Call of Cthulhu* creator, co-designer of *DOOM*, and now producer at Ensemble. "These people plan their vacations around this thing!"

"It's all the same to me," grumbles *D&D* co-creator and self-proclaimed "Father of Role-Playing" Dave Arneson. "I live in Florida, so it's still a plane trip away regardless." Pen and paper *James Bond 007* creator and current Westwood *Earth & Beyond* Lead Designer Chris Klug remarks, "It's sad to see it go. Wisconsin is where it all began...."

He's right of course, losing 30,000+ gamers; all with money to spend at local hotels and restaurants is a severe blow to Milwaukee's downtown area. "They'll feel it next year, that's for sure," says Tom Wham, "and maybe the convention will come back. I mean Indianapolis has no idea what it's in for!"

The show floor closed at 4pm Sunday August 11th with a note of finality. Gen Con was really leaving. When asked what he thought about it leaving, a guy who was dressed in an impressive Legolas costume said, "Farewell Gen Con, we'll see in you in Indianapolis!" That seemed to be the sentiment of most of the people at the show. They'd follow GenCon anywhere. But it's hard not to be disappointed with his response; I was kind of hoping Legolas would speak in Elvish. ●

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## Same Game, Different Year continued

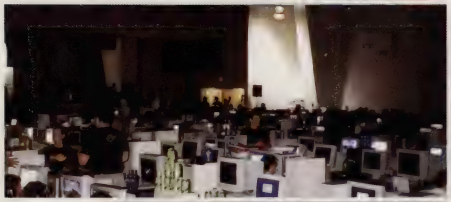
letting Daler know that he's not afraid to use it.

You can say that again, J0hn. Daler seems to be having trouble locating LeXeR and just when he does, he's a second too late. There's another one, and what a railgun shot it was. It's a quick 3-0 lead for LeXeR, who seems to be unstoppable.

Well, watching Daler play, you're right in that he's having difficulty locating LeXeR. Using this telestrator, I'll circle the sweat lines beading up on Daler's forehead. The whole convention is watching, and this has to be—Ohh $#!+! Four to nothing, LeXeR.

Unfortunately for Daler, there isn't a commercial break coming up. He really needs to regain his focus here. It took a lot to get to this point, but I'm starting to wonder how that happened.

No kidding, Pat. Ouch!



LeXeR is off to a quick 5-0 lead. Daler's skill level is there, but for some reason, he seems to be holding back. He needs strength here. He needs something that lasts. He need tough actin'—Oof!—six to zip, in favor of LeXeR.

It's almost like LeXeR is playing a bot here, J0hn. A really good bot, but LeXeR seems to be reading his every move as if it's scripted. Now it's seven to…

Ouch! Daler didn't want to do that. If you fall too far you kill yourself, and Daler just proved that, much to the dismay of the crowd. At 7 to -1, this is going to be the comeback of the century.

Well, chalk one up for Daler. He just blasted LeXeR out of the air to get back to zero. I guess this means he'd go first in the Double Jeopardy round.

< booth laughter >

### Feverishly fragging to the finish

Daler seems to have found his groove. He's mounting a small comeback now, returning LeXeR's earlier favors. This could get interesting.

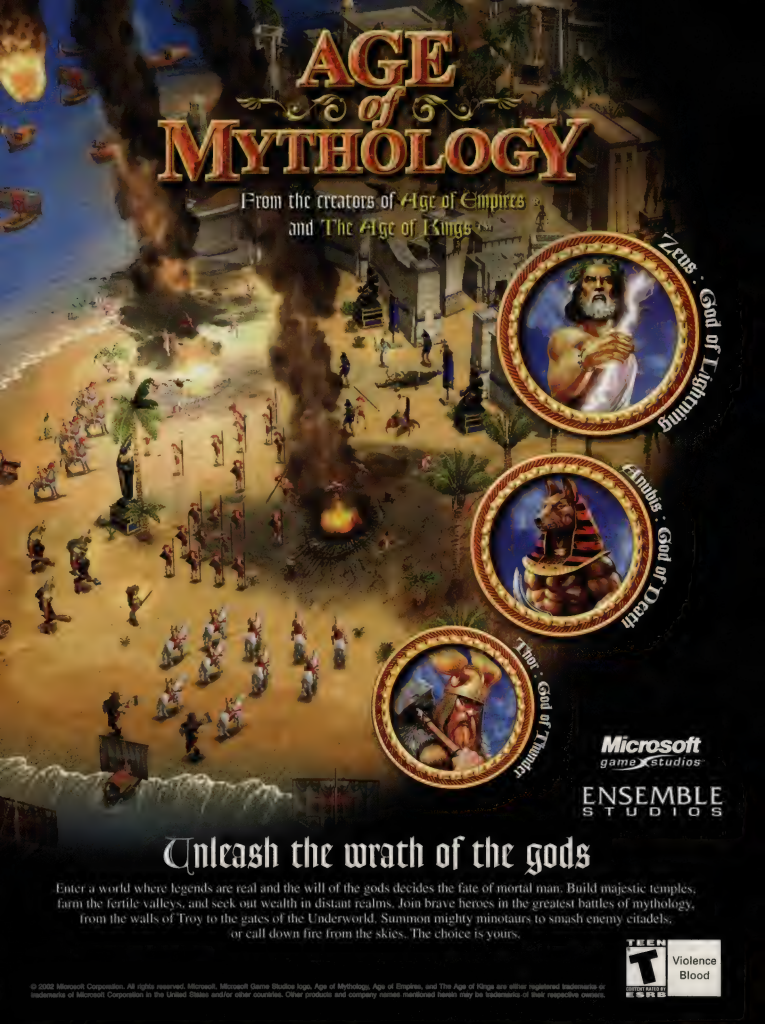
Interesting is right, Pat! We've gone from 7 to -1 up to 8-5 in a matter of minutes, and there's plenty of time left. If Daler can keep this pace up, he just might…Oh! It's 9-5, LeXeR.

Don't speak too quickly, J0hn. Both of them are getting aggressive now, and just like that it's 10-8 in LeXeR's favor. Here's the two minute warning.

It's time to talk the talk, or walk the walk. At 11-9, LeXeR still seems to be in control. Yuck. Make that 12-9. What makes us cheer for the underdog anyway?

I don't know, but with 30 seconds left, Daler has scored again, leaving us at 12-10. And there's the finishing bell! LeXeR's 12 frags earn him a nice $20,000 while Daler's valiant efforts translate into $10,000. Given more time, he may have pulled it off.

I wouldn't have wanted to see that, J0hn. That's all from this year's QuakeCon, but be sure to tune back in next year, when two more contestants will be put to the test for the big money. Until then, this is Pat Summ3r@ll alongside J0hn Madd3n saying, "Good night." ●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# The Ride of His Life

## Chris Sawyer talks about the phenomenon that is RollerCoaster Tycoon

by Steve Bauman

***By far the** most surprising success story in years is RollerCoaster Tycoon, a modestly budgeted little game that, for three now, has sat around in the Top 10 and quietly sold over four million copies of the original and its expansions in North America alone, making it one of the best selling games of all-time. Primarily developed by one person, Chris Sawyer, it's one of the rare games that crossed over to the mainstream while retaining its hardcore game credibility.*

*Sawyer doesn't do a lot of press, but he answered some e-mail questions about the sequel, which is scheduled for release in October.*

**Could you possibly have imagined the sales success and popular acclaim for the original *RollerCoaster Tycoon*?**

I expected the game would appeal to just a small proportion of games players, those who liked older games like *Transport Tycoon* [which Sawyer did for MicroProse -ed] and *Railroad Tycoon*, or those who were into roller coasters or theme parks, but it seems that the game appeals to a much wider audience than that.

**Can you put a finger on what it is about the game that resonates with so many players?**

I think it's the way the game "plays." Most people enjoy creating or building something, and that's exactly what it's all about. You spend hours (or days) designing and building your park and rides and then get the reward of watching the little people enjoying your handiwork.

**What kind of feedback do you get from players?**

It tends to be either very positive or very negative, with nothing in-between. People get very passionate about the game. Either they are upset because their roller coaster design won't work or people won't go on it and they don't know how to fix it, or they are enjoying it so much that they've forgotten to eat, sleep, and work.

**Because of its success, do you feel more pressure with the sequel to one-up the original than you did going from, say, something like *Transport Tycoon* to *RollerCoaster Tycoon*?**

Yes, I feel more pressure. The success of the original means there's a lot of expectation for the sequel and it isn't easy to work out what I should and shouldn't be doing to the game.

**The sequel looks like more of an evolutionary product than a complete rethinking of the original concept. Within reason, what would you like to see for the series down the road, and would you even want to continue doing more *RollerCoaster Tycoon*-style games?**

I think with a very successful game like this, you have to evolve the game rather than completely re-design it, otherwise you risk changing the game into something different which either isn't as much fun or doesn't appeal to the same players. To me, the game is all about construction and interaction with roller coasters and people, and it would be wrong to shift the emphasis to something else. I'm sure that the game will evolve even further in the future, while still keeping true to its roots.

**Considering the success of the original, what was your initial plan for the sequel?**

I had two main goals. First, to add more depth and detail to the game (e.g. bigger map size, more detailed roller coasters, scenario editor, vertical scenery construction), and second, to make it easier to build complex rides and parks (e.g. automatic tree removal, "ghost" object construction markers, instant track designs complete with scenery). Basically, I wanted the new game to be *RollerCoaster Tycoon* but bigger and better.

**What concerns, if any, do you have with changing things too much or too little?**

There was always a temptation to change the basic ingredients of the game or change the way the game played, but I felt that these were the very things which made the game what it is. ●

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# It Ain't Broke

## Federal court dismisses latest suit against game makers

by Robert de los Reyes, Esq.

**On December 1**, 1997, teenager Michael Carneal opened fire at his Paducah, Kentucky high school. When it was over and Carneal was arrested, investigators searching his home found—Aha!—video games like *Redneck Rampage*, *MechWarrior* and *Final Fantasy*. Since some 90% of adolescent males have played videogames, that's sort of like saying, "Aha! He has pencils!" But that didn't stop parents of the victims from claiming that several game companies, along with the creators of the movie *The Basketball Diaries* and some Internet porn sites, were responsible for the shootings because their materials "desensitized" Carneal and "caused" him to kill people.

However, the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals, which covers Kentucky and other Midwestern states, did stop them. Perhaps disappointing free speech advocates, the Court of Appeals expressly stated that it was not making a general constitutional ruling on whether video games were entitled to First Amendment protection. It decided instead that even if the families could constitutionally bring this sort of lawsuit, they failed to make a case based on regular principles of negligence. The court also dismissed the defective product claim on the grounds that words and pictures are not "products" that can be "defective" like a poorly designed seat belt.

Even though it refused to make a broad ruling on the First Amendment status of video games, it held that First Amendment rights were clearly at stake in this set of circumstances. It joined the 7th Circuit in refusing to extend obscenity law to cover violence as well. The court also wrote that since the media makers clearly didn't intend for the shooting to occur, they could not be guilty of "incitement." In brief, the court held that permitting a wrongful death action under these circumstances raised "grave constitutional concerns" that gave it additional reasons to dismiss the lawsuit. ●

# Princess Finally Saved

## Man takes 17 years to beat Ghosts N' Goblins

by Dale Tudge

**David Spears has** had a burden lifted from him as heavy as a suit of armor. The 36-year-old game enthusiast had spent almost half of his life dealing with an unforgivable shame: he had never defeated the arcade game *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. But thanks to some hard work, and some luck, he recently beat the game that had been haunting him for 17 years.

*Ghosts 'N Goblins* was developed in 1985, as one of many popular new side-view scrolling platform games. The player controlled the "knight in shining armor," and with a variety of weapons at his disposal fought against legions of evil creatures on the standard quest to save the princess.

"It was freakin' hard," admits Spears. "You started out with a throwing lance—yah, a lance—and you had to use it to fight off these ceaseless waves of undead hordes. There was no save-game feature either, so it was all-or-nothing each time you played."

Spears began playing arcade games when he was a teenager. He was instantly hooked on *Ghosts 'N Goblins* when it was introduced in the mid 1980s. He easily spent half of his Burger King paycheck at the arcade, feeding quarter after quarter into the hungry machine. Unfortunately, his lack of skill, combined with the often slow reaction time of the game, made it impossible for him to get past the third level. His frustration mounted when his local arcade closed in 1988, forcing him to travel eight miles to a 7-Eleven on the other side of town. That was the closest place to find the game.

[left] Spears looks at the machine that took hundreds (maybe thousands) of hours of his life away from him. >>> [right] Ghosts 'N Goblins, the source of David Spears' burden.

Over the years, Spears continued to invest time and money into the taunting game. Spears was like a ghost himself, often disappearing from parties and other social functions, just so that he could try one more time. Eventually he gave up and went on to finish college, but in 1998, a friend introduced him to MAME (Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator). Soon after that, there was a copy of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* running on his Pentium II computer.

"I still sucked at the game," he says, "but at least it wasn't 'goblin' up any more of my money. Oh sure, I burned up all my sick days from work, and I lost some friends, but it was a small price to pay for my obsession. But I still couldn't beat that *#&$ game!"

Spears fortune changed when he was recently dismissed from his job due to excessive absenteeism. "I got canned from the food processing plant and used my final paycheck to buy a HotRod game controller," he admits. "After I installed that, I discovered a *Ghosts 'N Goblins* walk-thru page, with all sorts of hints and other useful tips."

Spears used the advantage of being unemployed, and the lucky coincidence of becoming single, to lock himself in his apartment and focus on completing the game that had been a curse to his existence.

"I spent 37 hours straight, fighting that game for every inch of grass, ice, and lava," sighs Spears. "But it finally paid off!" He defeated the game on August 23rd, 2002, at 5:32 A.M. There was no fanfare, no celebration, just a quiet nod to the game that had been his nemesis for two decades.

Spears pondered his proud victory for a moment before he announced: "Now I'm ready for *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*!"

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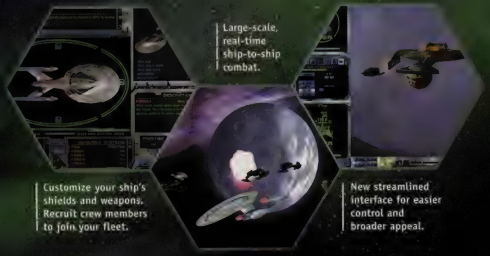

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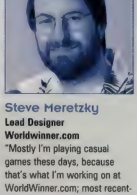


### Steve Meretzky
**Lead Designer**
**Worldwinner.com**

"Mostly I'm playing casual games these days, because that's what I'm working on at WorldWinner.com; most recently I've been playing a lot of word games such as *Tumbles Bees* on Pogo or *Text Twist* on Yahoo. On the PS2, I'm playing *Jak &Daxter*, which is probably the best console game I've played since *Zelda*. And on the PC, I've got a stack of games I need to get to, but mainly I'm still playing *Age of Kings*."

### Dave Lebling
**Co-founder, Infocom**

"Since November of '99 I've been playing mostly *EverQuest*. I have all the expansions, and am looking forward to the next one. The game isn't perfect but I love it anyway. My main character is 60th level Ranger, whose name is a clue that points to me. I'm in a great guild of kindred souls (i.e., weirdos) on a 'mature' server. It's sufficiently time-devouring that I rarely play anything else, except to give my kids bad advice on the games they play."

### Bob Bates
**President**
**Legend Entertainment**

"The problem with making games is that you frequently don't have time left over to *play* them. Right now, almost 100% of my time is spent working on the story, dialog, and voice recording for *Unreal II*. If I *did* have all the time in the world to play a game, it would probably be *Civilization III* or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game—I've never tried either one of them for fear of complete and total addiction."

## SPOTLIGHT

### Dialup Combat
**Mechwarrior Dark Age**
**The BattleTech Collectible Miniatures Game $19.95/$9.95**

Wizkids developed one of the first collectible miniatures games, *Mage Knight*. Its success spawned many clones and start-ups, but Wizkids itself now presents a game based in the *BattleTech* universe. *Mechwarrior Dark Age* takes you into the 32nd century as war rages around the known universe. While you'll not be able to use your *BattleTech* miniatures in *Dark Age*, the converse is true.

The game consists of a Starter Set and booster packs, with 116 different collectible figures in all. Each figure stands on a combat dial that displays all of the information you'll need to play, such as primary and secondary damage, speed, attack, defense, range, and a heat dial. The Starter Set includes eight random plastic articulated miniatures, including one 'Mech, two vehicles, and five infantry units—not for human consumption. "Warning! Choking hazard!"

## TOP SELLERS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS<br>Blizzard Entertainment<br>Rating ★★★★ | |
| 2 | NEVERWINTER NIGHTS<br>Infogrames<br>Rating ★★★★★ | |
| 3 | THE SIMS VACATION<br>Electronic Arts<br>Rating ★★★½ | |
| 4 | THE SIMS<br>Electronic Arts<br>Rating ★★★★½ | |
| 5 | BACKYARD BASEBALL 2003<br>Infogrames<br>Rating NR | |
| 6 | GRAND THEFT AUTO III<br>Rockstar<br>Rating ★★★★½ | |
| 7 | MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT<br>Electronic Arts<br>Rating ★★★★½ | |
| 8 | THE SIMS HOT DATE<br>Electronic Arts<br>Rating ★★★★½ | |
| 9 | THE SIMS LIVIN' LARGE<br>Electronic Arts<br>Rating ★★★ | |
| 10 | WARCRAFT III COLLECTOR'S EDITION<br>Blizzard Entertainment<br>Rating ★★★★ | |

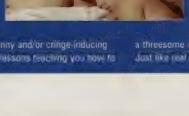
11. Zoo Tycoon; 12. RollerCoaster Tycoon Gold; 13. RollerCoaster Tycoon; 14. Diablo II Expansion Set: Lord of Destruction; 15. StarCraft Battle Chest; 16. Soldier Of Fortune II: Double Helix; 17. Delta Force Task Force Dagger; 18. The Sims House Party; 19. Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast; 20. Backyard Basketball

Source: NPD Techworld

## OFFBEAT

### Dick Jokes
**You Don't Know Richard**
www.notourproductions.com

Because lord knows geeks don't know how to talk to girls, *You Don't Know Richard* is an "interactive movie" (remember those?) designed to guide you through the minefield that is interpersonal relationships. Or at least the quest to get laid. Occasionally funny and/or cringe-inducing in equal measure, there are four lessons teaching you how to "score" properly (or improperly) with four women. What you learn from the hour or so of "gameplay" is that if you're a "Richard," you'll end up having unprotected sex with some skanky girl and die a horrible death. But if you're nice, listen to your date, and act like you're really interested in what she's saying, you'll end up in a threesome with her and her bisexual friend. Just like real life.



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[top] A gorgeous morning for a shipwreck. >>> [below] The ice cavern dungeon show off its shiny surfaces.

# Fantasy Islands

## Shrouded Isles is a new age for Dark Age of Camelot

by Cindy Yans

***Dark Age of Camelot*** surprised many gamers when it proceeded to give *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *Asheron's Call* a run for their money. Mythic Entertainment president Mark Jacobs has stated that there will never be a *Dark Age II*; he feels that once a gameworld is "coined," as it were, that there should never be a time when you need to start over. However, what you can expect are expansion packs, the first one of which is *Shrouded Isles*, due very late in the fall of 2002.

This expansion adds three continents to the already existing realms. Albion will bloom to include Avalon, an island laid to waste by the alliance of evil led by Morgana and the Drakoran, a race of dragon-men. Arawyn, lord of the underworld, is more than miffed at this, and decides to help Albion clean house. His servants are the Inconnu (French for "unknown") who ally with the forces of Albion to kick some fire-breathing butt.

Hibernia's island, HyBrasil, used to be just an Atlantean-style myth to the mainland residents. Not so. It is home to the tree-hugging, granola eating, Birkenstock-wearing race of Sylvans. Monsters called Formorians—obviously sent by the Exxon and Dow corporations—are hell bent upon destroying the Sylvans and every last tree. The Sylvans and Hibernians unite to oust these forest-razing enemies of nature.

A race of prehistoric savages, the Morvalt, are attempting to wipe out the island of Aegir, home to the wise, powerful, and legendary Troll Fathers who live beneath its crust. That leaves Midgard, as the odd land out, to ally with the Valkyn—a group of former Morvalt that the Troll Fathers have tamed. The Valkyn, the

Midgard Norse, and the Troll Fathers themselves pit their wits against the savage creatures.

## Class conflict

In addition to the three new races of allies, there are six new character classes, three per realm. Albion introduces Necromancers, a cloth-armor wearing/staff wielding spellcasting class that can revive the dead to do their bidding; and the Reaver, hybrid Fighters with chain armor, a variety of Albion weapon skills, and a taste for B&D as they can wield whips and flails. Hibernia has Animists, who strive to become one with nature. They get a mix of debuffs and other utility spells as well as a new hit point buffer spell to aid their friends. Also Hybernian are the Valewalkers, mages who have the ability to wield a large Scythe as a weapon. Valewalkers wear only robes, which they can buff with armor absorption, and for combat they may augment their scythe's damage with magical effects.

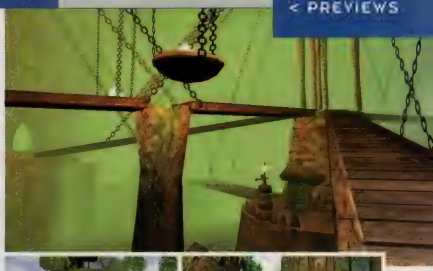
The Bonedancer is one of the new Midgard classes. They have the power to re-animate the skeletal remains of discarded animal bodies and use them as weapons, as objects of power, and as creatures that will obey commands. Think of them as Druids...of the Dead. Finally, for those who like to grunt a lot, there is the Savage class. These warriors shun complicated weapons in favor of simple blunt, sharp, and piercing ones, but their skill lies mostly in hand-to-hand combat.

## Engine tune-up

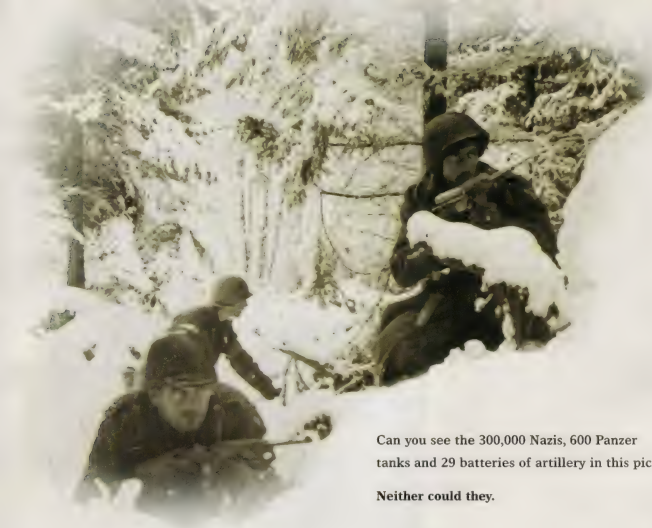
While the game is not importing a brand new engine, its current one has been spiffed up to provide faster framerates, reflective surfaces, super high-res textures, mip-mapping, and a new terrain system. Also included will be all new music, and a revamped user interface.

Mythic's Dream Team of Strike Force developers is polishing up the baseline game to address several issues—improving the player-versus-player server, spell crafting (which they may have already implemented by this time), and siegecraft. Perhaps the most significant addition, however, will be the addition of housing. While the attempt to do housing well has been with us since time immemorial, there have always been problems and complaints. *Ultima Online* suffers from bad zoning, with a way-too-crowded countryside, and *The Realm*'s housing was cute but lame. Here they plan four levels of housing, from mobile home to royal estate, with upgradeable areas that will allow you to play interior decorator, paramedic, blacksmith, thrift store, and more. You'll also be able to sell items while offline via a home-based consignment agent.

You will need the original game to play *Shrouded Isles*, and if you have long-abandoned your *Dark Age of Camelot* account, Mythic will be happy to reinstate it and begin to charge you for it once again. •



[from top] A bridge to Trollheim. >>> Return of the ents and entwives? No, a closer look will identify them as tree-hugging Sylvans barking up the wrong tree. >>> Here we see some of the more dramatic, moodier feel of the new dungeons. >>> The new Caer Sidi dungeon, with an inconnu mate in the foreground.



Can you see the 300,000 Nazis, 600 Panzer tanks and 29 batteries of artillery in this picture?

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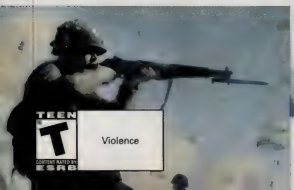

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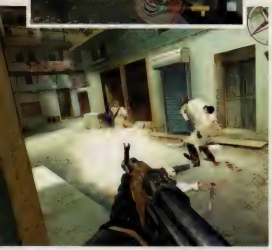
Cut scenes feature some of the most impressive lip-synching and facial animation seen in a game.

# Adventures in UNITY

## Monolith showcases the multiplayer mode for No One Lives Forever 2, demonstrating both a cracking-good new interface and cooperative missions

by Douglas Erickson



[above] The better your search skill, the more loot you'll find. >>> [left] This lovely weapon knocks players silly. Then you can take their weapons, drag them out of view, and continue your mission. [below] While your partner carries off a body, you're firing away. Not a good strategy.

**Since the days** of *Doom*, the silly rule that a first-person shooter should ship with a multiplayer deathmatch mode has stood unquestioned. While that might have been a selling point in the days before *Unreal Tournament* and other dedicated multiplayer offerings, nowadays, it's just an unmemorable bullet point wedged between two embossed skulls on the back of the box. With *No One Lives Forever 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way*, Monolith has come away with a winning idea: a strong, story-based cooperative multiplayer mode that elegantly complements the main plot arc.

Players adopt the role of general purpose UNITY agents responsible for the mission grunt work: getting pictures of spies, setting up safe points, and rescuing their more high-profile brothers and sisters from the clutches of disaster. With somewhat randomized drops and enemy placement, as well as a role-playing-esque stat allocation system, these co-op missions can have a great deal of play variation.

Monolith demonstrated two of the cooperative missions: a rescue operation set in Japan and a target identification run in India. In both missions, teamwork was emphasized through the use of both scripted events and overwhelming opposition. Communication was essential, ere the errant teammate get a tulwar in the throat. In a flash of brilliance that alleviates the grind of post-mortem respawn, the game allows dead players to be resurrected with minimal health if another team member reaches them in time and clicks on their body.

As of this writing, the net play on a LAN was rock solid, though the quality of Internet play (a weakness of previous iterations of the game and its engine) is unknown. But in a season that will witness the release of *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *Battlefield 1942*, it seems Monolith has made a very wise decision to distinguish its multiplayer component so significantly. ●

# YOU'VE BEEN LEFT BEHIND...

The third installment in the Earth 2150 series, *Lost Souls* is a 3D RTS voyage that has you scrambling for resources as you swear revenge on those who left you behind in a world that is set to crumble and vanish. The challenge is to make it out on time. The goal is to make it out alive.

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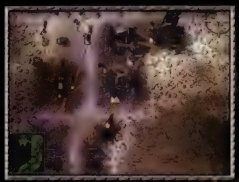

Strategy First

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(clockwise from right) If you blow it up, they will notice. >>> My other car is a Hummer. >>> Rebuilding the bridge is left up to engineers. >>> Got grenade, will travel.

# No More Nazi Nice Guy

## Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory equips Covert Ops players with a handy Sniper Snooper

by Kevin Rice

**As if there** was friendly territory in the original game...

With each successful game comes what the developers hope will be a successful add-on pack, and for *Wolfenstein* fans, *Enemy Territory* is shaping up quite well. They've made the usual additions, with more maps, new weapons, and the like, but most importantly, there are decent bots that you can use in both single and multiplayer modes, and there's a whole new class.

The strongest part of *Wolfenstein's* gameplay is its multiplayer, and the addition of bots should help flesh that out. While it's obvious that human players are always better opponents, sometimes that isn't an option. Being able to use bots in any mode of play, offline or on, and with scalable difficulty should add immensely to the replay value of the game.

Even better, there's an additional class to play with. The new "Covert Ops" player is essentially a sniper with some new goodies. In addition to a silenced sniper rifle (oddly called a "Snooper"), you'll have a silenced pistol and a very cool smoke grenade for providing cover where there are no shadows. Perhaps best of all, the Covert Ops player can steal the uniform of a downed enemy. This is a two way street of course. You look exactly like an enemy, so those on your team will have to check your name before shooting to make sure you aren't a casualty of friendly fire. On the enemy side, it's exactly the same—they can't tell you are in disguise except by your nametag—with one exception: an enemy Covert Ops player will detect you immediately. Of course, if you go incognito into the enemy base and start shooting like Rambo, they'll figure it out, but it's a very cool twist.

Other new features include a retooled interface, a new command map complete with the ability to set custom waypoints, and a streamlined chat/server connection screen. If all goes well, you should be crossing over into *Enemy Territory* before Christmas. ●

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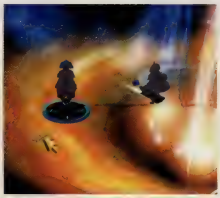
# H.M.S. R.L.S. in space

## Treasure Planet is Disney's surprise gem for the holidays

by Cindy Yans



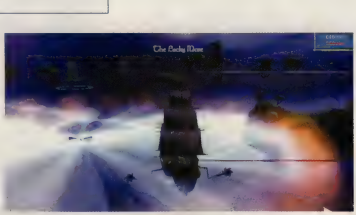
[upper left and right] The mighty Starhammer-class Man o' War. >>> You'll be able to throw a line to tow vessels and other equipment to a more desirable location. [above] The visuals are designed to give you consistent focus on your mission goals. >>> [below] The Lucky Hare may not be so lucky after all—not with that star mortar.

**When Disney describes** *Treasure Planet: Battle at Procyon* as suitable for all ages and for gamers interested in simple or sophisticated strategic play, it's hard not to do a virtual eye-roll and prepare to be polite when their representatives demonstrate the game. After all, the company said that last year's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* was for "real" gamers too. It wasn't, at least not according to most "real" gamers—fake gamers couldn't decide. This time, though, it looks as though they could be right.

Developed by Barking Dog Studios (*Homeworld Cataclysm*, *Global Ops*), *Treasure Planet* is based on the beloved novel *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, and is being developed concurrently with the animated film of the same name. Both are due in late November of this year. You play Jim Hawkins, who has just graduated as a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. The "Etherium" (think of it as a vast area of space) is filled with pirates, and you need to build a fleet that will stand up to them, and up to the Ironclad ships around which the mystery is based, in order to protect the queen and the empire. John Silver, apparently not as long as he used to be, makes a comeback as a cyborg cook—initially charming, but ultimately very dangerous.

The single-player campaign pits you against the marauding pirates, and the multiplayer game allows up to four players to create customized fleets for battle over the Internet. There are three playable factions in addition to the Ironclad Fleet: the Royal Navy, with its well-rounded, sturdy battleships and versatile and maneuverable escort ships; the Pirate Fleet, which consists of former Navy and civilian vessels that have been retrofitted with heavier guns, armor, and engines; and the Procyon Fleet, evolved from ice skiffs on the Procyon homeworld, whose ships are very fast and maneuverable for headlong attacks. With 35 different ships in all, and upgradeable weapons and crewmembers, the number of strategies you can try is sizable.

The interface is simple, but if you're an experienced real-time strategy player, you can look for many advanced options that will make play more interesting, and you may wish to play on a higher difficulty level. What is really astounding, though, is that the game looks amazing—the explosions, detonations, and other effects are spectacular. The gameplay feels a lot like *Starfleet Command* without Klingons, or *Homeworld* on a 2D plane. Disney is attempting, very slowly, to enter the hard-core gaming market, and between the upcoming *Tron 2.0* and this surprising release, they seem to be creeping a few steps closer. ●



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# Vivec Unleashed

## The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal takes you where Morrowind didn't dare

by Cindy Yans

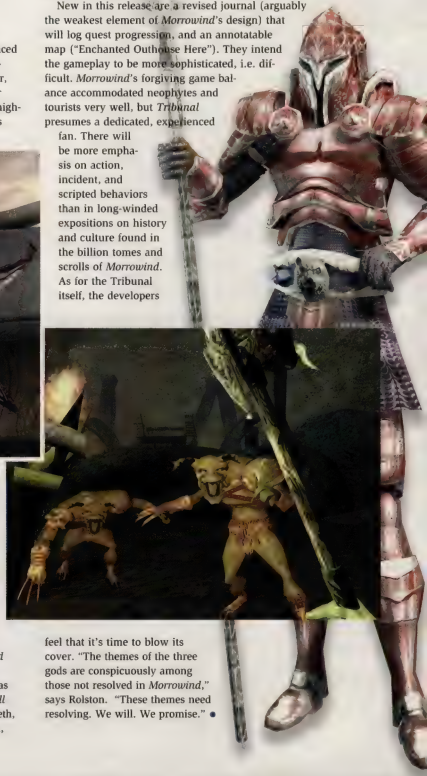
**After so many** years of being *Elder Scrolls*-less, gamers find themselves faced with not just one but two of this franchise's titles in one year. In November, Bethesda plans on releasing *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*, an add-on to its highly acclaimed *Morrowind*. *Tribunal* has

(above) An Ordinator in full regalia. Yes, he sees you through those seemingly vacant holes. >>> (right) Where did these goblins get Thuilan Claws?

actually been in the oven for a long time at this point. "[Its] basic design dates back to 1996, when we nobly and naively imagined we could create the entire land mass of Morrowind in a single game," says lead designer Ken Rolston. "Development started in earnest on *Tribunal* immediately after *Morrowind* was complete."

*Tribunal* begins after King Helseth has usurped Morrowind's throne (*Daggerfall* fans will remember him as Prince Helseth, son of Queen Barenziah). An aging god, presumably one of the original "Tribunal" consisting of Vivec, Lord Sotha Sil, and Lady Almalexia, drifts deeper into madness. You enter this volatile environment, pursued by assassins, and prepare to journey through Mournhold, capital city of Morrowind, which is surrounded by the city of Almalexia. You'll also visit the Clockwork City of Sotha Sil, and battle through another batch of uniquely-designed dungeons. "They're all custom and bigger than many of *Morrowind*'s," expounds Project Leader Todd Howard. "Why? We're dealing with a set space in the expansion, so we want to make sure we use it all really well."

New in this release are a revised journal (arguably the weakest element of *Morrowind*'s design) that will log quest progression, and an annotatable map ("Enchanted Outhouse Here"). They intend the gameplay to be more sophisticated, i.e. difficult. *Morrowind*'s forgiving game balance accommodated neophytes and tourists very well, but *Tribunal* presumes a dedicated, experienced fan. There will be more emphasis on action, incident, and scripted behaviors than in long-winded expositions on history and culture found in the billion tomes and scrolls of *Morrowind*. As for the Tribunal itself, the developers feel that it's time to blow its cover. "The themes of the three gods are conspicuously among those not resolved in *Morrowind*," says Rolston. "These themes need resolving. We will. We promise." ●



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[left to right] Two ships that pass in the eternal night >>> EVE's ships have warp drives to rival ship in Starfleet

# Tranquility Space

## EVE Online tries to reinvent the MMORPG

by Suzanne Ashe

**Multiple generations of** off-worlders, a complex economic system and scads of cool tattoos are just a few of the things players will find in *EVE: The Second Genesis*. This space-based massively multiplayer online game takes role-playing games to ethereal heights. With modifiable avatars and ships and an infinite number of political factions and storylines, *EVE* offers the journey of a thousand parsecs.

Game journalists got a chance to test drive *EVE* at San Francisco's Pan Pacific hotel in late August. Under the watchful eyes of the game's Icelandic developers, participants created their own characters from a menu of four races: the Amarr, Gallente, Caldari, and Minmatar. (The fifth race, the Jovian, takes some evolution to achieve.) They then went on mini-missions and participated in a couple of skirmishes.

The game itself doesn't have that "pick-up-the-mouse-and-go" style of play. Mouse driven flight controls are counter-intuitive at first, and navigation through the star systems requires a thick playbook. But the goal of this game is more than just exploration, it also strives to be an upstanding member of the capitalist cosmos (i.e. less revered than feared).

For most of the game you maneuver spacecraft through swampy nebulae, swooshing from spaceport to spaceport, trading intergalactic commodities, and forming alliances. You start off with a standard, government-issued clone (hatched by the lowest bidder no doubt). If you don't travel far from your home world, however, you won't run into the same dangers, since the Concord—an inter-planetary Gestapo—is there to protect you.

True to all space adventures there is a hearty element of conflict. Danger lurks behind every moon, every asteroid. The most lethal are the space pirates who deal in bio mass; they will not only pillage your ship, but also parcel out your body parts to the highest bidder. If bandits get the upper hand, all you need do is send a beacon to the Interstellar Savings and Clone and, "poof," a new character arrives on the scene. In addition to the PC game, publisher Simon & Schuster also plans to turn *EVE* into a full multimedia marketing package including TV, movies and books. ●

[above] Activity abounds among the space debris >>> [right] A struggle with Emla in the Enelaise Solar System

# Saving Sgt. Barnes

## The expansion for Medal of Honor to deliver more Kraut-bustin' entertainment

by Jason Cross

***Return to Castle Wolfenstein*** isn't the only swastika-stomping shooter to get an expansion this fall. *Spearhead*, an expansion for *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, embraces and extends all the features that made Electronic Arts' initial take on the genre so compelling.

The immersive single-player game is extended with three new missions taking place among nine levels. You no longer control Lt. Mike Powell this time around, instead you step into the dusty boots of Sgt. Jack Barnes, who begins the game by parachuting behind enemy lines at Normandy as part of Operation Overlord. It's the kind of level meant to recreate the "wow" factor of the beach invasion from Powell's tour of duty. But that won't be the only impressive set piece. Expect impressive things from the Battle of the Bulge as well.

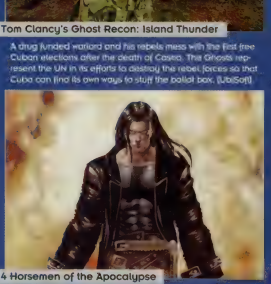
You'll team up with British and Soviet troops in your missions, using a handful of new weapons including smoke grenades that will actually obscure you from the computer AI's view (a failing of the un-expanded game). You'll also spend some time blowing up lots of vehicles and artillery with explosives, and of course take your turn in a tank or two. The relatively short campaign tops off with Barnes teaming up with the Soviets as they invade war-torn Berlin.

Multiplayer *Medal of Honor* has proved tremendously popular, so the bulk of the expansion is devoted to it, with about a dozen new levels and around ten additional multiplayer maps chosen from the winners of a recent mapping contest. Server admin will finally get to kick or ban players, which should help reduce rampant cheating, and they can limit the available weapons as well. Together with standard player voting features, it looks like online soldiers will have reason enough to pick up the add-on this holiday season. ●

(top) It wouldn't be Medal of Honor if you didn't blow the snot out of a tank or two. >>> (below) Can you storm Berlin with your Russian buddies? Da! >>> (inset) My tank can beat up your tank.

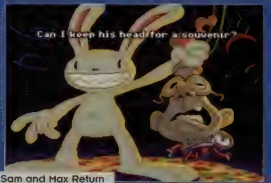
**Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder**

A drug funded warlord and his rebels mess with the first free Cuban elections after the death of Castro. The Ghosts represent the UN in its efforts to destroy the rebel forces so that Cuba can find its own ways to stuff the ballot box. [UbiSoft]



**4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

In this present-day action game, you play the archangel Azadzoth who must find the three "Chosen" and combine their powers to save the world from Pestilence, War, Famine, Death, and Amway. [3DO]




**Sam and Max Return**

The talking dog and the naked bunny once again hit the road in as-yet unnamed sequel to the superlative Sam and Max Hit the Road. Mike Stemmle again brings his warped and twisted sensibilities to the table. [LucasArts]

**Zoo Tycoon: Marine Mania**

Swim with the dolphins, elephant seals, and jellyfish in cyberspace in this expansion for Zoo Tycoon. Tickets to Sea World not included. [Microsoft]

**Lock On: Modern Air Combat**

This upcoming simulation of modern air combat has slipped into the first quarter of 2003. It will still feature more than 35 missions, 32-player Internet play, and a dynamic battle generator. [UbiSoft]

**ShadowFlare**

This mission-based PC action/role-playing game comes in four separate $15 episodes. You're a mercenary adventuring through the vast ruins of a demon ruled (i.e. "Diablo-esque") world. [Emurasoft]

**Cossacks: Back to War**

A second follow-up to the original Cossacks, this effort (100 missions in the time period between the 16th and 18th centuries. It also adds two new nations, Switzerland and Hungary. [CDV]

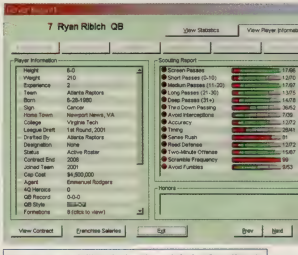
**Commandos 3**

Your favorite rendered WWII guys are back, with promises of improved graphics, better AI, all new missions, and "more accessibility." Sounds like Commandos 2. [Eidos]

# Sitting in the Owner's Box

## Front Office Football: The Fourth Edition extends a great football dynasty

by Jeff Lackey




Note the new additions in the player info for "Agent" and "Home Town."

**In a world** dominated by big-budget games put together by large development teams, Jim Gindin's one man self-published *Front Office Football* surprised everyone by appearing on the "best sports sim" nomination lists for most publications. Gindin refined the game over the years, expanding into college football and securing a deal with EA Sports to publish the 2001 NFL edition. Fans of the series have speculated whether or not he would stick with football or move on to another sport, but the NFL won out, and Gindin will release *Front Office Football: The Fourth Edition* this fall under his own Solecismic Software label.

As in past versions, you're an owner/general manager of an NFL team, dealing with realistic trading, player aging, an amateur draft, tons of stats, play calling (if you wish), free agency, a salary cap, and lots more. You can even demand that your city build you a new stadium and move if they turn you down.

So why not another sport? Gindin says he wanted to "finish" his NFL sim, adding features that he was not able to include in previous editions. Some are focused on the play calling aspect of the game; for instance, a new play calling interface and the ability of quarterbacks to "learn" more plays that they can call as they develop and become smarter. Another change will be a major expansion of the game plan and depth charts, designed to give you more control over your team on the field. You will be able to tailor strategies for specific game situations (e.g., the score and time remaining) and dictate which players will be used in various formations. Dealing with players will be more complex due to the addition of contract incentives, player agents, player hometowns (a player may prefer to move closer to home when choosing a team in free agency) and team chemistry. More stats will be recorded for players, managers, and teams, and finally, the interface has received a facelift.

While the changes are a mix of the significant the subtle, all are improvements to what was already an extremely good game. ●

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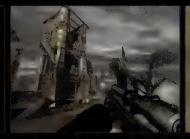

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THE THING

# CREATURES OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

## Guns in the sun and gadgets in the night define Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield and Splinter Cell, the latest from the house of Tom Clancy

Forget *Red Rabbit*, Tom Clancy's latest literary offering. The true essence of the technothriller god shines true in a pair of games due this winter from UbiSoft/Red Storm Entertainment. *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield* and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* carry the Clancy swagger and obsession for detail with panache, serving notice that the master still has his magic touch.

"Vintage Clancy" is what you're really getting in both projects. Not in the sense of "old," but of quality and character. *Raven Shield* continues the *Rainbow Six* tradition of offering tightly-constructed, hardcore tactical shooters with a heavy dose of the cerebral, while *Splinter Cell* is the first Clancy game to focus on a single character, and the first being developed for near-simultaneous release on a console (in this case, the Xbox). Despite their different styles, though, both games proudly display their technothriller lineage. Like classic Clancy novels, they're an appealing blend of macho posturing, gun-nut detail, and pulse-pounding action. The differences are in their radically divergent treatments of the now-standard "stop the terrorists" theme that permeates most technothrillers these days. It's those differences, too, that gives each game its distinctive character.

## Enormous effort

UbiSoft is putting an enormous effort into the Clancy line—*Raven Shield* alone has 50 people working on it—and everyone has a great respect for the subject matter. The Tom Clancy organization has "absolute veto power" over everything UbiSoft does with a product bearing his name, notes producer Chadi Lebbos. "There are things we've had to change, changes we've had to make in some products because of Clancy's objections." Even though the master doesn't communicate directly with the game design teams, "He makes his wishes known," says lead game designer Michael McCoy, Jr. "We'll get notes from the Clancy organization that make it clear that Tom Clancy himself said this, this, and this need to change."

So what is it that the Clancy crew is shooting for with a Tom Clancy game? Marketing VP Tony Kee notes that Clancy games have traditionally appealed to "pretty hardcore-people who play a lot of games and have high standards." *Raven Shield* follows in those footsteps. Like the previous two *Rainbow Six* games and their add-ons, it's a team-based, counterterrorist-themed shooter, where the emphasis is on close-range combat and high-tech equalizers. The difference this time is, well, there's more stuff, and it looks better. Banish your memories of blocky environments and pedestrian textures, because UbiSoft is getting *Unreal* this time. Using the latest Unreal Engine technology for the game means you'll see mission maps that finally start to look as you'd imagine them in real life. With more polygons, higher-res textures, and sophisticated lighting even the standard crate-filled warehouse can start to look pretty hot. A horde of Brazilian bad guys sporting deliberately ugly Hawaiian shirts, an abandoned prison that actually looks, well, abandoned, and an oil refinery that seems to come from a Texaco commercial (a Texaco commercial with terrorists and lots of guns, anyway) are just some of the fruits of UbiSoft's association with Epic's techno-

[above] Rainbow Six 3's environments include lovingly rendered industrial landscapes. (inset) It's not all fun in the sun—some missions take place in the dead of Winter.

[below, left to right] The team prepares to assault an airport in Brazil.

The new orders interface offers quick and easy commands.

[above] Lean around a corner, throw a grenade... sometimes you don't need to play fair.

[below] The Unreal Engine allows for more impressive environments.

The guy in the orange vest (a hostage) is practically screaming "shoot me first."

logical tour de force.

One place where those looks are getting top billing is in the weapon design, one of the signature areas of a Clancy game. *Raven Shield* boasts 57 distinct weapons, from the lowly .45 automatic pistol to some hot-off-the-drawing-board boomsticks you've probably never heard of. Next-generation Israeli assault rifles and submachineguns, fully-automatic, silenced sniper rifles from Russia, tricked out H&Ks, it's all here. But as you might suspect, there's more; every weapon can be modified to a truly crazy extent. McCoy says there are at least 150 different weapon combos you can set up, because virtually every weapon can take a suppressor or "silencer," plus many have options like scopes, shoulder stocks, super-sized magazines, and other goodies.

"Say I have a mission that's going to be inside, in close quarters," says McCoy. "I could take an MP5-SDW [a suppressed 9mm submachine gun], and another guy on the team could take the MP5 with a scope, turning it into a mini sniper rifle. Another guy could take the large magazine and have a mini light machine gun, to provide cover." In this way you can configure your force any way you like it, particularly useful for those cooperative multiplayer matches.

Multiplayer is going to be a huge part of the *Raven Shield* experience, which is not surprising considering the huge popularity of the *Rainbow Six* franchise with the Internet shooter crowd. The game will ship with six exclusive multiplayer maps, in addition to the available single-player maps. You'll get the usual assortment of game types, from elimination, team elimination, deathmatch, a demolition-style bomb mission, and assault and defend, plus cooperative play. One of the multiplayer maps you'll get to try is an enlarged version of the city map from the original *Rainbow Six*, that McCoy says is still the community's favorite; yet another sign of how much Red Storm and UbiSoft are trying to keep their loyal fan base happy. And communication with your buddies will be easier, too. In addition to the usual canned messages and chat system, you'll now be able to mark locations on a level map and send it to all of your team mates, so their maps will be updated as well. It's a technique from real-time strategy games that should be quite welcome in the shooter arena.

## Going it alone

The single-player game looks, if anything, even more impressive than multiplayer. With 15 missions over 12 different maps, spanning a range of locales from warehouses to oil rigs to prisons and regions from the Republic of Georgia to Brazil, lack of variety should not be a problem. You'll have the same sort of game dynamic, too, in that you assemble a team of operatives, outfit them, and plan your mission before you give the first go code. If you want to, that is; McCoy emphasizes that you don't have to do anything more than click a few buttons and off you go.

"The planning system is designed to be easier, more intuitive, and more fun," he says, and given the Byzantine nature of the system in earlier games, the reform is welcome. While not as barebones as the one in *Ghost Recon*, the planning system is not only streamlined, it is, dare we say, sexy. Chief among its virtues is the ability to see, in full 3D, the view from any point on the map as you plan your routes. Give a team a waypoint, and you can see what they'll see, sans bad guys of course, when they hit it. Get a route set up, and you can track through it in a 3D steady-cam view *à la* Stanley Kubrick. "It's really great because you can see if you'll have cover here, or be exposed there," says McCoy, and a trial run bears that out. No more guessing about lines of sight and where to place your team; now, you can simulate on a smaller scale the sort of scale model and sand table planning that real commando teams use to prep for dangerous missions.

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(top) The missions are set in realistic environments. (inset) Stealth is, as always, critical.

Models are way beyond those from previous Rainbow Six games.

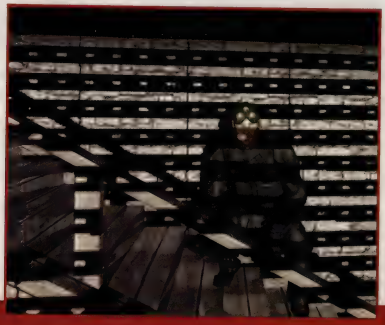
Red Storm long ago admitted that few of them, much less average players, actually used the original *Rainbow Six* or *Rogue Spear* planning systems, so this one represents an attempt to bridge the gap between *Ghost Recon*'s "planning for dummies" and the original "PhD required" systems. It's all part of what you might call the mainstreaming of Tom Clancy, though that risks overstating the case. For instance, while this time you'll finally get first-person weapon views—one of the things designer McCoy is most proud of—you'll also get hardcore trimmings like the super customizable weapons, realistic flash bangs, and death physics instead of death animations. "That means no more arms and legs stuck in walls," according to McCoy, and indeed during play you'll notice that corpses act like, well, corpses, not marionettes. It's the convenience touches, though, that will likely make the game stand out, things like the new on-screen orders system. Want your team to move to a spot and toss a grenade? Simply point the crosshairs at a spot, hit the space bar, and select move and toss from the rotary menu. It's a little like *Operation Flashpoint*, and a little like *Neverwinter Nights*, only simpler than either.

One further refinement in a game full of refinements: in *Raven Shield*, you'll be able to lean just a little bit, or a lot, instead of the all or nothing gyrations of most games. You'll also be able to open doors centimeter by centimeter using your mouse wheel, allowing for some stealthy surveillance and entry. Also, you can move while leaning, allowing you to creep around corners effectively. Combined with the slick character models and high-tech lighting in the game, the effect is often highly dramatic. In earlier Clancy games, you had to suspend a lot of disbelief to imagine you're leading a crew of crack commandos; here, that suspension is a lot easier, because everything just looks and feels so much more real.

## A piece of the puzzle palace

Where *Raven Shield* is definitely a refinement of an existing product line, *Splinter Cell* is something completely new for the Clancy franchise. Kee has specific goals for this one, too. "We hope that *Splinter Cell* will be the carrot that draws more gamers to the Tom Clancy brand," he says, noting his hope that after sampling the high-tech world of shadow war in this console-friendly solo effort, you'll want to move on to the meatier team-based offerings. It's the first Clancy game designed for near-simultaneous launch on the Xbox and the PC, the first where you control only one character, and the first where wholesale slaughter isn't its *raison d'être*.

Some have compared the game to *Metal Gear Solid*, but UbiSoft chafes at that. Producer Mathieu Ferland, an exuberant and somewhat frenetic fellow whose temper hasn't suffered from the stresses of simultaneously preparing the game for Microsoft's notorious quality assurance tests and getting it ready for the PC as well, cautions that *Splinter Cell* is it's own



(left) Sam Fisher spends much of Splinter Cell lurking in the shadows.

(opposite page) He's also a master of rope climbing.

# The Sum of All Franchises

## Looking through the scope at the Future of Tom Clancy games

Like Jack Ryan, the hero of most of Clancy's novels, the Clancy brand just keeps on going. Beyond *Raven Shield* and *Splinter Cell*, UbiSoft has big plans for their flagship property. "The Tom Clancy brand is one of our strongest sellers," says marketing VP Tony Kee, "and we will continue to feed the demand for new products."

A new night vision system for a tango in the night.

So just what is a Clancy game? Kee notes that every Clancy title has several things in common. In addition to real-life situations and realistic military doodads, Clancy games emphasize themes like patriotism, good versus evil, and strong central characters. What's more, Kee says, "the Clancy games have a strong moral message," emphasizing strict rules of engagement and discouraging random killing. He feels that when combined with groundbreaking gameplay and technical achievments, this moral tone is one of the key elements of a Clancy title.

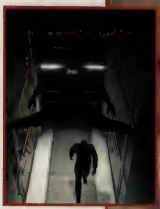
As to how much input Tom Clancy actually has in the development of the games bearing his name, Kee will only say that from the early days of Red Storm to the present, Clancy has never dictated the production of any game. Rather, he opens doors to the military community for UbiSoft's designers, helping to insure the fidelity of the series. The producers of the games tell a slightly different story, emphasizing that the Clancy organization keeps a close watch on what goes in to each title, and occasionally "suggesting" changes. Whichever model is accurate, it's hard to argue with the results; the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* lines have earned critical and commercial success, and seem destined to soldier on for some time. Some future campaigns will include expansion packs, like the *Island Thunder* add on for the original *Ghost Recon*. Due this fall, the second expansion for the military-oriented tactical shooter is set in post-Castro Cuba, giving you the opportunity to whack the bad guys in eight solo and five multiplayer missions, set in a Caribbean rainforest among other locales. Expect vehicular insertions and a variety of single and multiplayer enhancements as well this time around, along with in-game cinematics.

You can also expect a mission pack for *Raven Shield*, although according to UbiSoft Public Relations manager Tiffany Spencer, it's too early to start giving specifics. If the past is prologue, however, you can expect a passel of new missions and more tangos to tangle with in 2003. As for *Splinter Cell*, Kee is optimistic. "Given the pre-release buzz it's gotten we expect it to be a huge success," he says, noting that he thinks the series "has a very bright future." Given the game's dual console-PC lineage, though, it's uncertain whether follow-on products will be expansion packs or stand-alone games.

You'll also be seeing *Ghost Recon 2* in the next year or so. While UbiSoft won't comment on specifics, as the game is still in the conceptual phase, you can expect another high-energy campaign tempered with realism. "If the 'real' Ghosts could do it, it can go into the feature request list," says Spencer, so don't expect any laser rifles or grav packs. The setting, as yet undetermined, will be a change of pace from *Island Thunder*. "Let's just say that the Ghosts will definitely need a change of gear from their tropical adventures," she notes. ●

sort of beast. "At first you may think, oh, it's just *Metal Gear*, but as you play it, you'll see it's actually very different," he says.

One way it differs from the PlayStation classic is its flexibility. As Sam Fisher, a super spy from the (real) National Security Agency's (fictional) Third Echelon, your tasks are covert, usually involving undetected infiltration and exfiltration into and from sensitive locations. Sometimes you have to kill, but usually, you want to be in and out like a ghost; merely getting detected will cause you to fail some missions. Because it, too, uses the Unreal Engine, the environments are fully 3D and loaded with detail. You can shoot out nearly every light, plink holes in fire extinguishers, throw stuff to cause diversions—it's like a modern-day *Thief*, without the supernatural stuff, or *Deus Ex* without the conspiracy. It's purely third per-



(top) Fisher enters the old fashioned way, from the roof. (inset) The dots on Fisher's night vision goggles let you see where you are and don't alert the enemy.

Use fiber-optic cameras to spy on your foes. Voyeurs, rejoice!

dark game, reflected in the extensive low-light and thermal visual aids you carry. Shooting out lights and prowling in the dark is a vital tactic, and this is definitely a game where moving slowly and quietly is *de rigeur*. Shadows are spectacular, with varying sizes depending on light sources and occlusion. The effect in game is amazing, although you shouldn't expect to crank up your PC to maximum res and be wowed. "The fill-rates of even the best video cards today can't handle the full range of lighting we do at the highest resolutions," says Ferland. This is partly because the game is optimized internally for the Xbox and its rather low-res needs.

More controversial may be the save system. It also emphasizes stealth and caution, as the game uses checkpoint saves exclusively. "We wanted to keep the tension," says Ferland, who doesn't think the lack of creep and save will deter PC gamers. "The checkpoints are pretty frequent," he notes, and usually after any significant encounter or long stretch of activity. How PC gamers will respond to this apparent concession to the Xbox mentality remains to be seen, but in use the system seems to work well enough. This is a game that rewards patience. If a situation seems too tough to tackle, just wait a bit, or look for another way.

son, which works well with both the console and the PC control schemes, and which allows some spectacular acrobatic moves. Don't want to be caught in the corridor without a hall pass? Jump up, grab the fluorescent light fixtures, and swing yourself up to the ceiling. Want to drop down on an unsuspecting guard? Do a split jump and brace yourself against the walls, and wait for him to walk underneath you.

Aesthetically, the game uses several visual filters and a specific artistic approach that emphasizes muted, desaturated colors, lending a pale bluish cast to the environments. It's a

Aiding your search for the path less traveled will be a cornucopia of gadgets, from flexible cameras you can squirm under closed doors to remote cameras launched from your super-secret ultra-modern rifle. The cameras come in two varieties, one that just gives you a view of the area and another that first emits a whistle to lure any guards and then discharges lethal gas to smite them. There's also a host of non-lethal weapons you can employ, as some circumstances, such as the mission where you infiltrate the CIA's headquarters, prohibit you from killing anyone. And it looks like you'll need all of these tricks to survive, because going head to head with the bad guys is a Bad Idea.

"If you have to fight five or six guards, you're dead," says Ferland, as he demonstrates the futility of stand up firefights. "This isn't a shooter, really; it's a stealth game with guns." ●

(left) Sneaking is your core discipline, so you'd better wear slippers. (inset) The requisite "grimy bathroom" scene.

# G.I. COMBAT

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# EverQuest

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# TECHNICALITIES

## the whole enchilada

### When evaluating hardware, it's not just about the numbers

**In the hardware** world, we're used to numbers. We live and die by them. You can't read a hardware review in any magazine or on any website that doesn't lay out the data for you: gigabytes per second, megahertz, megabytes, watts, decibels, degrees, and more. Everything from Amps to Z-buffer compression ratio can be objectively quantified, and it usually is.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the coverage of gaming-focused PC hardware. A video card review will be full of stats about memory bandwidth, fill rate, pixel shader execution, polygons per second, and so on. These theoretical stats will be accompanied by a host of performance benchmarks both synthetic and from real-world applications. You can't really blame us hardware reviewers for providing all that data when the buying public seems to want it. It's hard to blame them, when all the cool hardware cost so much money. If you're going to shell out 400 clams to make your games better, you want some sort of concrete assurance that you're spending that hard-earned money optimally.

But with all the focus on the specs of gaming hardware, it's worth reiterating a credo that everyone who evaluates technology—be it cars, stereos, or computers—should memorize: the things that can be represented numerically are often less important than those that cannot. The benchmarks and specs can't tell you if a video card is going to be stable, if it's simple and intuitive for the average user to change anti-aliasing settings, or if you're going to need to download new drivers every two months to make your latest games work right.

Ask a gamer what their computer is like and you'll get a list of specs: Athlon XP 2100, 256MB RAM, GeForce4 Ti 4200, 48X CD-RW. I'm starting not to care so much about those things. The truth is, while careful selection of components can definitely impact performance, the guts of PCs are mostly commodity items. You can get whatever processor and video card and sound card you want from dozens of vendors. But does the case look good? Does it have USB or FireWire ports in easy-to-access locations? Is it loud? Does it run cool or hot? Is it nice and tidy inside, or is the cabling a total mess? I'd gladly sacrifice half a minute of CD-burning speed if it meant my drive didn't sound like a jet engine when it spins up.

There's something to be said for the look and feel of things. Don Norman is an advocate of more human-centered technology. He's a professor at Northwestern University now, but he's perhaps best known for his stint as VP of the Advanced Technology Group at Apple for a while. You know Apple—they're that company that all us gamers like to poke fun at while secretly resenting the fact that their computers look a hundred times better than most of ours. Don wrote an interesting essay titled "Emotion & Design: Attractive Things Work Better" (read it at his website: www.jnd.org) in which he gives several examples of how things that we appreciate aesthetically do their thing better, such as the immediate adoption of color monitors in the 80s by businesses, despite having no tangible productivity benefit. Here's a better example: doesn't your car drive better after you wash and wax it?

This sensibility is largely missing from the computer world. Okay, I swear my computer runs faster right after I perform a needless hard drive defrag, but that's about it. Generally, I don't like my computer so much as need it. But I want to like it. I want to see it from across the room and feel like it's not an eyesore. I want to just plug things into easily accessible, cleverly hidden ports, and have them work right away. I want to rest my fingers on my mouse and keyboard and feel like I'm touching something cool. Apple understands this. Maybe a little too well, in fact, as they have at times produced some of the best-looking and utterly unusable hardware ever to grace a desk, like the iMac's original mouse. But they also produce a whole slew of hardware that makes even hardcore PC fanatics drool and ponder paying what they know is too much money just to have that really gorgeous Cinema Display or an iPod.

It's starting to change, with companies like Gateway toting out PCs that emphasize good looks over the typical laundry list of internal components. But it needs to go a lot further. Technology companies need to hire more designers and artists, even those that don't make hardware. Matrox floored me by actually having an attractive, easy-to-use driver configuration program with the Parhelia, and it's basically just an ape of WindowsXP's control panel. Think of what a company with deep pockets like NVIDIA could do for the usability of video cards with the aid of a guy like Don Norman. It would help if the technology press reviewed not just a product's specs, but the whole enchilada. ●

**TIP OF THE MONTH**

**ipconfig in Windows XP –** Long-time multiplayer gamers are used to typing "ipconfig" in the Run menu of their Windows 98/ME computers to find out their machine's IP address. In XP, it opens a command window and closes it immediately. To get around this, instead type "cmd /k ipconfig".

**Q** I'm a proud owner of a GeForce 4 Ti 4400 graphics card for the past month, until that is I hear all of these things that ATI will release with their new next-gen Radeon 9700 card and how DX9 will enable so many awesome new features. What I want to know is: have I just wasted my money on a card that won't be able to render pixel and vertex shaders 2.0 or do any of the other new features that are being implemented into DX9?

Joe B.

**A** Well, "wasted your money" is probably too strong a phrase. No, your GeForce 4 will not handle any of the new DirectX 9 stuff, and that includes the 2.0 spec of vertex and pixel shaders (including floating-point pixel formats), displacement mapping, and so on. But we're only just starting to see video cards that can do this stuff. Matrox's Parhelia was first out of the gate with a partial DX9 implementation, and ATI's Radeon 9700 is first with a full one. NVIDIA will follow suit shortly with its own DX9-class card, currently code-named NV30.

These are $400 video cards, and far from the mainstream. It's going to be awhile before you start seeing games that actually take advantage of these new features. Sure, the Radeon 9700 and NV30 will also be blazingly fast and let you play current games at high resolution with anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering enabled. You could do that with your Ti 4400 and just not get frame rates as high. But games that really use DX 9 are maybe six months to a year away at best. In the meantime, your Ti 4400 has all the features necessary to get the most out of the games you play.

**Q** In your August issue you had an article about LAN parties and I've become interested. But, where do you go to find LAN parties in your area? Oh, and another question: Is there anywhere you can go on your computer to find out what video card you have?

Ian F.

**A** It may seem just too obvious to be true, but the best place to start looking for local LAN parties is www.lanparty.com.

To find out what video card you have, right-click an empty area of your desktop and choose "Properties," then select the "Settings" tab. It should say what card and monitor you're using right there above the slider to change resolution, but you can find more by clicking the "Advanced" button.

**Q** I'm looking to purchase a computer specifically for the purpose of running a dedicated server for *Neverwinter Nights*. What kind of components are best suited for this task and what other considerations must be taken when purchasing a computer that will run 24/7?

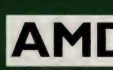
Tad H.

**A** Every game is different about its server requirements, but as a general rule you'll need a fairly beefy processor (at least an Athlon 1800+ or 2.0GHz Pentium4) and lots of RAM (512MB). It's not all that important to have a huge hard drive, since your server won't be holding a ton of material, but you'll want a nice stable operating system on it like Windows XP, Windows 2000, or Linux if you're experienced enough with it.

The biggest determinant for the quality of your server is going to be its Internet connection, though. You'll need plenty of bandwidth with very little packet loss, and a reliable service provider. Take special note of the "upstream" data rate of your service. Every DSL and cable modem connection has enough downloading speed to handle server duties, but what's even more important is the ability of your computer to send info out to the clients connected to it. Figure a minimum of 16-20 kilobits per second for each player you want to have connected, so if you want to host a game with 16 players connected at once, you'll need at least a steady 256 kilobits of upstream capability. Many DSL or cable connections are limited to 128 kilobits and even those that provide 256 or more truly get that speed at the best of times (like 4:00 in the morning). You can test your connection's speed by heading to www.dslreports/stest/.

## TECHBYTES

**DirectX 8 mobile from ATI** – Formerly known by the code-name "M9," ATI's new mobile graphics chip has finally been revealed under the name Mobility Radeon 9000. In terms of 3D capabilities, the notebook chip is essentially the same as the desktop version of the Radeon 9000 (see review on page 71). That is, it's a four-pipeline graphics card that fully supports the vertex and pixel shaders in DirectX 8.1. That's probably the most exciting advancement, as it marks the first DX8-class notebook chip on the market, but ATI has also implemented a new radiometric filter for scaling the notebook's LCD display. So when you run, say, a 1600x1200 screen running at 1024x768, the new scaler should drastically reduce the blurring common to all LCDs. Depending on the game, resolution, and other factors such as whether or not anti-aliasing is enabled, the high-end 64MB chip runs anywhere from 5-25% faster than the next fastest mobile chip out there, the GeForce 440 Go. It's also available in a significantly slower and cheaper 32MB version with half the memory bandwidth. This all adds up to a pretty impressive new mobile chip.



**Movement on the AMD front** – Last month we told you about nForce2, NVIDIA's major revision to their Athlon motherboard chipset. But VIA has a new one as well, the KT400 chipset, which also supports USB 2.0, fast memory speeds, a faster link between the north bridge and sound bridge, and pretty good integrated audio. More interestingly, both boards support a 333MHz front-side bus. This is because AMD will release new Athlon XP chips with ratings of 2800+ that step up the current 266MHz front-side bus to 333MHz, which should offer a pretty good performance boost. Then, late this year, be prepared for Barton, a new Athlon chip core that increases the on-chip cache from 256KB to 512KB. While the next-gen "Hammer" processors might be what all the AMD buzz is about, it looks like there's a lot of speed and life left in the good 'ol Athlon XP. ●

# Gimme that Crown!

## ATI's Radeon 9700 Pro is the new king of 3D

by Jason Cross

MANUFACTURER ATI Technologies [www.ati.com]
MSRP $399

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

**Every new generation** of graphics cards from the two performance leaders, ATI and NVIDIA, directly target the other in a bid to win the hearts and minds of those rare consumers willing to shell out big bucks for the ultimate graphics card. Generally, that means hardcore gamers. ATI's latest bid to get you to part with $400 comes in the form of the Radeon 9700 Pro, a higher-than-high tech card designed with the help of a new engineering team formerly known as ArtX, which was acquired shortly after delivering to Nintendo the design for the GameCube console's graphics and audio chip.

### By the numbers

No video card review would be complete without a slew of impressive-sounding numbers, and ATI's latest has those in spades. Other cards support AGP 4x, it supports AGP 8x, though in most circumstances it offers minimal performance gains. It' has four vertex shader engines, and if they didn't do anything but transform triangles they could do 325 million a second. That's more than twice the geometry processing muscle of a GeForce4 Ti 4600. It has eight pixel pipelines, where all the other high-performance cards have no more than four. Interestingly, these pipelines only have one texture unit each (two is common, and Matrox's Parhelia has four), but the chip can blend 16 textures in one "pass" by looping back over-and-over.

The core chip, a monster at over 100 million transistors, runs at 325MHz and the memory clock is 620MHz. With a 256-bit DDR memory interface and eight pixel pipelines, that gives the chip an absolutely insane amount of fill rate and memory bandwidth—2.6 gigapixels and almost 20GB/sec, to be exact. But as we move forward with 3D graphics, it's not all just about fill rate and memory bandwidth anyway.

### It's all about the shaders

DirectX 8 and the GeForce3 brought the concept of "shaders" to consumer graphics. Shaders allow programmers to actually tell the video card how to process triangles, textures, lights and so on, instead of just sending triangle and texture data to the video card and having it spit out the other side as a rendered image. It's standard fare for movies, and it's rapidly becoming standard for real-time graphics. DirectX 8's vertex shaders (programmable polygons) and pixel shaders (programmable pixels) were a good start, but rather limited. DirectX 9 introduces version 2.0 vertex and pixel shaders, which are far more powerful. Vertex programs can be many times longer, and pixel programs can use four times as many textures and can be much longer as well. The more powerful shaders in DirectX 9 will let programs do things like make skin that actually looks like skin instead of flesh-colored plastic, cars with two-tone paint, shadows with diffuse edges, "correct" lighting, and photography-like effects. It's amazing stuff, but it's also far more demanding on video hardware.

Of particular note is the new pixel shader format. DirectX 8 only calls for 32-bit color, with eight bits per "component" (a component is a color value, transparency value, bump map value, etc.). DirectX 9 supports many new formats up to 128-bit color with 32 bits per component. But here's the rub: DX8 used an integer pixel format, DX9 includes floating point formats. Integers are whole numbers, like 6, 129, or -234. Floating-point numbers are fractional numbers, like 143.00, -3.438, or 643.0000001. So now the pixel information has moved from 256 possible values for each component to over

[above] The floating-point pixel shaders in DirectX 9 allow very realistic lighting. >>> [below] 3D that was once pre-rendered, like this scene from Animusic, can look almost as good in real-time.

four billion possible values, with a choice between wide range or extreme precision. This is important, because when developers start writing long shader programs to make the sheen on a wet car or the sweat on a hero's face, this kind of precision is necessary to produce accurate results. It's also necessary to create 3D graphics that accurately represent the literally hundreds of thousands of levels of light intensity that the human eye is capable of seeing in the real world.

The Radeon 9700 Pro can process up to 24-bit floating-point data through its pixel pipelines, for a grand total of 96-bit floating-point color. That sounds like a step down from the 128-bit color supported in DirectX 9, but it's a huge leap from the 32-bit integer color of current cards, and there are some parts of the pipeline that work in 32 bits. ATI assures us that 24 bits per component is all that is needed for a very long time, and even when DirectX 9 games start to appear, it's likely that developers will only use 16 bits per component at most, to save on memory.

### Quality improvements

With the Radeon 8500, ATI made great strides in both anti-aliasing features and video quality. Most importantly, the engineers developed a method of anisotropic filtering that seriously reduced its impact on frame rate. The new anti-aliasing algorithm in the Radeon 9700 Pro is more efficient than before at least as good if not slightly better than what we've seen on competing cards. Anisotropic filtering, a method of using more texture data to make the image appear sharper, has also been overhauled. Enabling 8X anisotropic filtering now results in a rather minor performance penalty (usually 10% or less), and an issue with the Radeon 8500's anisotropic filtering not working on some surfaces has been remedied. Because of all the improvements to both AA and anisotropic filtering, in addition to the extreme memory bandwidth and fill rate, it's possible to employ both at once and still get quite smooth frame rates. Games look absolutely fabulous using both features together. Toss in the dual 400MHz 10-bit RAMDACs to convert the digital signal to your monitor's analog and you've got some extremely impressive image quality.

Perhaps one of the most interesting advances is the new video processing capabilities, which feeds digital video directly into the pixel shader engine. This lets developers use pixel shaders to do nifty tricks with the video, from standard features like de-interlacing and scaling to more impressive features such as a de-blocking filter which makes typically blocky streaming video on the 'net look much smoother. Popular video players like Windows Media Player or RealOne will need patches to support this feature, but they're already on the way.

### It's a barn burner

All those nifty new features come packaged in a chip with enough brute-force power and memory bandwidth to absolutely dominate the benchmarks. Just having a lot of raw power doesn't mean that ATI skimped on improving efficiency, and the company calls their collection of new bandwidth-saving technologies Hyper-Z III. The third iteration of Hyper-Z includes improvements to the features of Hyper-Z I and II, making the card even better at quickly rejecting overdrawn

# DirectX 8 for the Masses

## ATI's Radeon 9000 Pro isn't a speed demon, but it does offer pixel shaders on the cheap

RATING ★★★★½

MANUFACTURER ATI Technologies (www.ati.com) MSRP $149.00

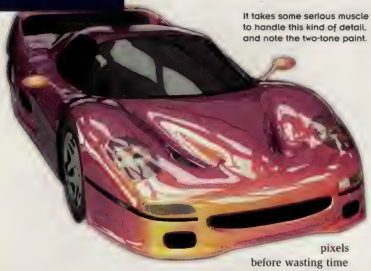
**If we had** a rolled-up newspaper, we'd pop ATI on the nose with it and shout, "No! Bad ATI! That's a *bad* ATI, and you get no doggie treat!" Hot on the heels of the GeForce4 MX naming fiasco (GeForce4 MX cards, unlike the more expensive "Ti" series, don't even have the DirectX 8 capabilities of a GeForce3 and are often slower), ATI turns around and does the same exact thing. You would think that a Radeon 9000 Pro would have to be faster than a Radeon 8500. 9000 is a bigger number, and that's the way these things work, right? You would also think that if the Radeon 7000 series provided all DirectX 7 features, and the Radeon 8000 series was for DirectX 8, then the 9000 series must give you DirectX 9's new capabilities. You would think that the inclusion of "Pro" at the end means that this card is for serious hardcore gamers and professionals—those that need the best of features and speed.

You would think these things, but you would be wrong. When asked why ATI chose such a misleading name, the company said it wasn't meant to mislead consumers, they just consider the new line to be of the same "series." That's exactly the same answer NVIDIA gave six months ago.

This new Radeon does not accelerate any of the cool new features in DirectX 9 as its more expensive sibling, the Radeon 9700, does. It is basically a reduced-cost version of the Radeon 8500, which means it delivers all the features of DirectX 8.1 (pixel and vertex shaders), which is a first for a video card in the sub-$150 price range. That's a really great thing, because you're starting to see some games make use of pixel shaders for some neat effects, and there will be a lot more as the cost of the hardware moves down. Though this 64MB card retails for about $149, you can find it for as much as $50 less if you shop around online. This is definitely the cheapest way to get those cool water effects in *Morrowind*.

But driving down the manufacturing price means that something has to give. The Radeon 8500 has four pixel pipelines with two texture units each. In order to get the size and cost down, ATI has effectively stripped out one of these texture units. The "Pro" version of the Radeon 9000 runs at 270MHz with 550MHz memory, almost the same speed as the older Radeon 8500, but these cost-cutting measures mean it's often considerably slower. Slower isn't a crime when you cost over $100 less, and when compared to other cards in the price range, namely the GeForce4 MX series, ATI's new budget offering holds up rather well. There's an even cheaper non-Pro version of the card running at slower speeds, but that enters the realm of "not worth it."

Ultimately, this is exactly what you expect from a new low-cost offering. It's about time full DirectX 8 features are made available to the sub-$150 crowd, and overall speeds are comparable in most titles to similarly priced cards, if not a little better. Because of its full support for DX8-class pixel and vertex shaders, it's a better buy than a GeForce4 MX, and because ATI has drastically improved its drivers, it's a pretty safe alternative as well. The Radeon 9000 Pro is a very good budget card with a horribly misleading name. Cost-conscious gamers should be happy with it as long as they know what they're getting: a slower version of the Radeon 8500. ●



It takes some serious muscle to handle this kind of detail, and note the two-tone paint.

pixels before wasting time processing them. It also compresses Z-buffer data a lot better, especially when using anti-aliasing. Clearing the Z-buffer values, which has to happen between every frame the video card draws, will take 1/4 the time it used to with the Radeon 8500.

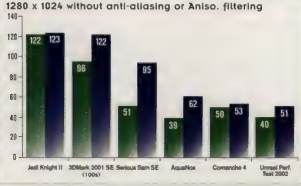
In both real gameplay and synthetic benchmarks, the speed of the Radeon 9700 Pro just puts the GeForce4 Ti 4600 to shame. What was once clearly the fastest card on the block now finds itself running 20-50% slower at moderate resolutions with no image quality features enabled. But turn on anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering and it gets downright embarrassing, with the Radeon 9700 Pro often running more than twice as fast.

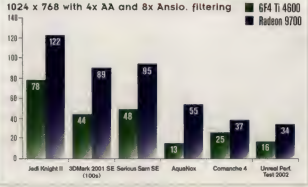
As with Matrox's Parhelia, it takes a lot more than lofty promises to justify a $400 price tag, but ATI's latest beast of a video card truly delivers. Every feature of DirectX 9 is supported, from displacement mapping to the impressive new vertex and pixel shaders. Image quality is better, advanced features run faster, and the new video features (always one of ATI's strong suits) look pretty cool as well. In addition, the Canadian company has put together the most robust and stable drivers they've delivered in years. There's probably a little more performance to squeak out of such a complex card, but we've run into no visual glitches or compatibility problems at all.

To say that the Radeon 9700 Pro is impressive would be like saying that Microsoft has some money. It just doesn't quite get the point across. It can be pretty hard to justify laying down 400 smackers for a video card, but if you were going to, this should be the one. By the end of the year, we should see Radeon 9700 cards at slower clock speeds from other vendors (without the "Pro" moniker) and a Radeon 9500 card at a much lower price with only four pipelines, but we should also see NVIDIA's next-generation chip as well. After ATI's most impressive showing in many years, they've got their work cut out for them. ●

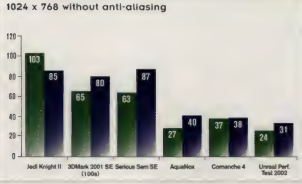
| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | Amazing speed, great image quality, impressive new features |
| DOWNSIDE | Expensive |
| RATING | ★★★★★ |

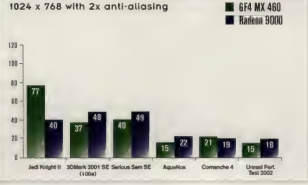
## RADEON 9700 PRO BENCHMARKS




## RADEON 9000 PRO BENCHMARKS



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# The NEWBIE'S GUIDE to Building a Computer

You don't have to be a hardware wiz to build your own system. A novice dives in and finds out it's not as hard as you might think. by Jeff Lockey

**Did you ever** want to build your own computer, selecting the precise components you want rather than settling for the limited options from a Dell or Gateway? Have you ever been frustrated because you couldn't upgrade the processor or some other component in a pre-built system because of non-standard cases or motherboards? Do you think it would be cool to know your system as intimately as you would if you built it yourself? And did you think "that's way too complex for me?"

Same here. But I decided to take the plunge, and let me tell you, it's not that hard. This isn't a "let the expert tell you all the tricks from years of experience," rather a chronicle of a total computer-building newbie, mistakes and all. And guess what? While it can be a little confusing, it's not nearly as hard as you might think.

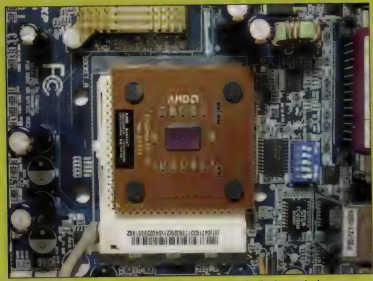
## The soul of a new machine

The first and most important decision is the CPU: do you go with Intel or AMD? I chose AMD because the price/performance ratio is good, and it's popular with home builders. Since I wanted to build a top of the line system, I went with AMD's fastest CPU, an XP 2200+. I used a TaiSol Heat Sink/Fan (HSF) recommended on AMD's website.

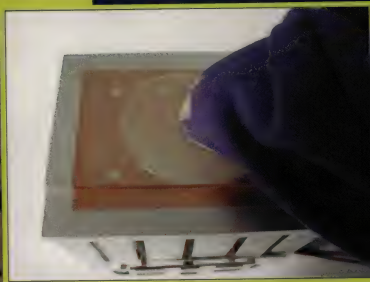
After reading a lot of reviews I decided on the Gigabyte GA-7VXRP motherboard. It has a tremendous amount of built in features, such as good sound, Ethernet, eight USB ports, etc. For memory I went with two 256 Meg PC2700 chips from Samsung. There's a third memory slot in the motherboard if more memory is needed in the future.

We'll talk about the other components as we get to them during the building process, but for now we have the CPU/HSF, RAM, and motherboard: the heart of the new computer.

JASON'S TIP *Don't forget that Pentium 4 chips using Rambus RAM require memory chips be added in pairs, and you'll need memory "blanks" called CRIMMS to fill up the empty slots. So if you want 512MB in such a system, you'll need two identical 256MB Rambus modules and two CRIMMS.*



The little arrow on the CPU goes into the corner next to the lever pivot.



You'll remove the bulk of the thermal paste from the HSF, leaving only the pores filled.

## If you can't stand the heat...

The smart thing to do before you get started is to read the user's manual and locate the different jumpers, switches, and connection sites on the motherboard. I couldn't wait to start building, so I skipped that step, deciding that I'd just figure it out as I go. I put the motherboard on the dining room table and pulled out the CPU. Its socket is easy to find: it's the same size as the CPU. You simply pull the socket lever arm up, line up the little arrow on the CPU with the corner next to the lever arm pivot, drop the CPU into the slot's holes, and then lower the lever arm down and lock it in. Ha! Nothing to this PC building business.

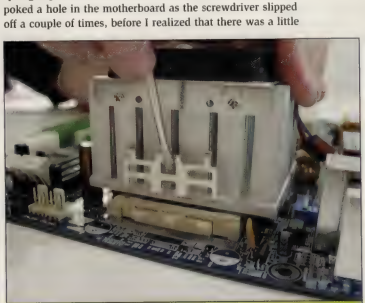
If you purchase a retail CPU, the HSF will have a thermal pad applied, and the following steps will not apply (the thermal pad is simple to use: just pull the tab off according to the instructions.) However, in my case I needed to apply thermal grease. I used the very popular Artic Silver. I'd read a lot about how applying this incorrectly could cause your system to explode into a fireball the first time you start it up, which is an exaggeration, of course, but this is one of the more important steps.

The first step was applying a dab on the part of the HSF that will make contact with the CPU. I spent a lot of time trying to line the HSF up with the CPU, staring to see exactly where they would touch. Dumb. Just put it in the general spot, since you'll be smearing it all over the surface. I used a painter's plastic glove to spread the paste over the bottom of the HSF, per instructions, then wiped it off with a lint free cloth. The goal is to fill the microscopic pores of the surface with the paste.

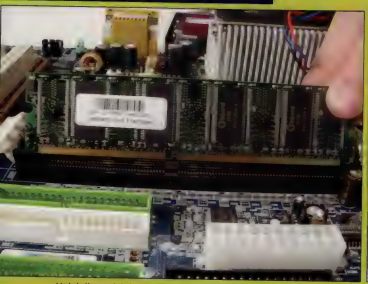
Artic Silver makes a big deal about not applying too much to the CPU core, just half the size of a grain of rice, so I made sure it was just that size. After 20 minutes of trying to spread this into a uniform surface over the CPU core, my son Daniel looked over my shoulder, explained that I had too little grease to get a uniform surface, and I told him that he just didn't understand the intricacies of computer construction. Another 20 minutes later I added more grease and made a smooth—well, kinda smooth—surface. Lesson: don't be afraid to add a little more than a half a grain of rice's worth.

**JASON'S TIP** *Jeff went way overboard in his precise application of thermal compound. It's not even a necessary step (though recommended) and the pressure between the CPU and HSF will spread it out. Just don't goop up your whole CPU with the stuff and you should be fine.*

The next step was adding the HSF to the CPU. It's easy to break the CPU if you do this wrong. AMD has a video on their web page on how to do this, and I'd recommend you watch it. The key is to not apply a lot of hand pressure on the HSF as you try to connect the side spring connectors, and keep the HSF level during the process. Attaching the first side of the spring is easy, but it took some serious pushing down with a screwdriver on the other side to get the spring connector down and over the clips. I tried to push the bottom of the spring clip with the screwdriver when I started and almost poked a hole in the motherboard as the screwdriver slipped off a couple of times, before I realized that there was a little



Push the clip down with the screwdriver while keeping the HSF level on the CPU.



Match the notch in the RAM with the notch in the slot.

Make sure the connectors backplate matches your motherboard before you put the board in the case.

slot for the screwdriver in the upper half of the spring. Make sure you do this before putting the motherboard in the case. It's tough enough on an open flat surface.

JASON'S TIP *A great many motherboards have been ruined by errant screwdrivers scraping along them while putting on a HSF. Just take your time and push down carefully.*

The next step was plugging the HSF fan plug into the motherboard connector, followed by plugging in the memory. There's a notch in the memory chip that lines up with the notch in the memory slot, and a couple of clips that secure the chip once it's fully inserted. If the clip doesn't quite close over the chip, you don't have it all of the way in.

## Into the case

I chose the Antec Plus 880 case for its reputation and hefty 430-watt power supply. After taking the side panel off and laying it on its side, I tried to lay the motherboard on the existing standoffs, the small brass spacers that ensure the back of the motherboard doesn't touch, and short out on, the metal case. As simple as this sounds, I couldn't get the board lined up with the standoffs, and I realized the problem was that the back connector plate, that metal piece with cutouts for the sound jacks, parallel and serial ports, USB connectors, etc., didn't quite match up with the hardware on the motherboard. Scrounging through the Gigabyte box turned up a new plate, which I used to replace the one on the case, resulting in a perfect fit.

Next, I pulled out the wires that were attached to various locations in the case and just stared at them: it seemed like there were 50 wires and connectors, most of which had odd lettering that meant nothing to me. I didn't have a clue what to do. Time to finally pull out the manual.

As I read what all of the little jumpers and connectors on the motherboard did, and squinted trying to read them on the board deep inside the case, I realized that I'd forgotten to set the switches that set the clock speed and bus speed. The

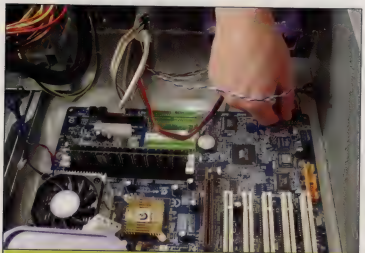
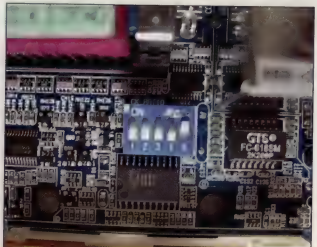
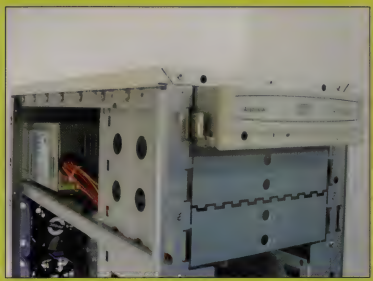


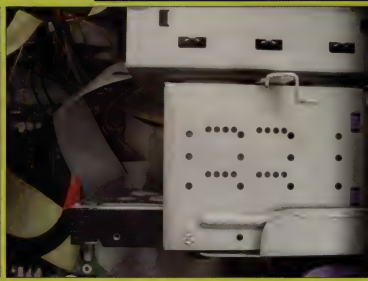
Figure out where to insert the smaller plugs (for case switches and lights) into the motherboard before installing the board into the case.



Find and set all of these little switches, if any, before installing the motherboard into the case.



When installing the drives, remember that they need to be flush with the front of the case AFTER you reinstall the faceplate.



The hard drive after attaching it to the cage and sliding the cage back into the case.

manual was worthless for figuring this out, so I went to the Gigabyte forum at www.amdmb.com and was quickly rewarded with the correct settings for my CPU. I also realized that I should have set these before installing the HSF and before putting the motherboard into the case, as finding the tiny switches was a pain. The same goes for connecting all the little wires that go to the power switch, reset switch, front panel hard drive led, PC speaker, etc. These all go on tiny connectors and should have been attached before inserting the board in the case.

The power supply also had a bewildering number of cords, some of them easy to identify and some puzzling. The manual stated that there were three different power connectors that could attach to the motherboard: I just plugged in the really big one that obviously fit the connector on the board and ignored the other two.

JASON'S TIP *Most motherboards don't need you to set dip-switches or jumpers to adjust processor settings and have an auto-detect mode (or are set in software in the BIOS). Still, Jeff learned a valuable lesson: Dig into the manual and learn where to plug in all those little wires and what settings to make on your motherboard before you get started.*

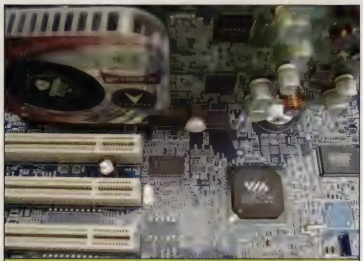
## Putting in the drives

Next came the drives: CDRW, hard drive, and 3.5 floppy. I chose the highly regarded Aopen 40X CDRW. Depending on the number of IDE connectors your motherboard provides, you may have to decide whether to connect two drives to the same IDE and set one as the master and the other as the slave by setting jumpers in the back of the drives. If you have to do this, set the hard drive as the master. The Gigabyte board has four IDE channels, so I set each drive to be the master on its own dedicated IDE connection.

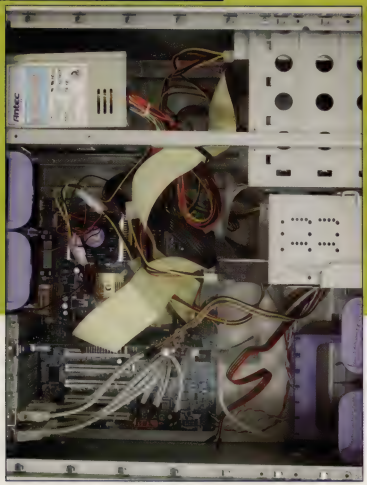
Removing the plastic drive cover face plate on the case and breaking out the metal plates to open up the required drive slot was simple. I attached the drive rails to the CDRW. It was simple to then slide the drive into the case. After spending a couple of minutes trying to line up and attach the IDE cable and power cable with my arms stuck into the case, I realized that the smart thing to do was to pull the drive back out and pull the cables out through the front opening so that I could see them to align them properly. The IDE cable has a little slot to help with the alignment on the board and the drive, and the red line on the IDE cable goes to the pin one side on the drive connector. The power connector has two slightly rounded corners for proper alignment. One rule: if you're really having to force the connector, stop and make sure it's aligned correctly. You can actually force a connector on the wrong way if you push it hard enough (trust me).

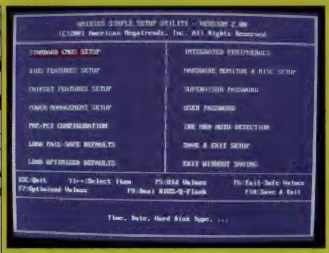
This case has a slide out cage in which the hard drive is attached, and then reinserted. I picked up a Western Digital Special Edition 80GB drive, because of the performance potential from its 8MB cache. This time I set the jumpers and attached the cables before inserting the drive, then slid it into the case.

Lastly, the venerable 3.5" floppy drive. I splurged and spent eight dollars on a Sony drive. The cable for the floppy



The button will click in once you've fully inserted the video card.






This not only looks bad, but the cables are restricting the air flow in the case (left).

Success! The system is running and you can now adjust the BIOS settings (above).

is narrower than the IDE cables for the other drives and it will have a small twist next to the side that goes into the floppy drive connector. I connected the cable and power connection as above, and the drives were installed.

JASON'S TIP *The days of the floppy drive are numbered, and you can be forgiven for not installing one at all. You can boot from CD on modern computers, and even major brand computers next year will eliminate the old 3.5" floppy.*

## Almost done

I picked a VisionTek Geforce 4 Ti4600 as my video card, as it was the top of the line GeForce card at the time. This is a very simple installation: plug the card into the AGP slot, making sure that the slot's "button" is seated correctly. Lastly, I plugged in the extra USB port cables that came with the case, stepped back, and surveyed my work.

One problem: there were cables and wires everywhere, including some that covered the fans on the HSF and the case fans. This isn't just an aesthetic problem—this kind of mess can inhibit the air flow through the case and result in excess heat. A few ties and the cables were cleaned up.

With a deep breath, I closed up the case, plugged in the monitor, plugged in the keyboard and mouse, attached the power cord to the computer, gathered the family, pushed the "On" button on the front of the computer… and nothing happened. Crap, I must have hooked something up wrong. Just as I was about to open the case up, I realized I hadn't turned on the power switch on the back of the computer. Duh! So I flipped that switch, held my breath, and pushed the On button on the front of the computer, and… still nothing.

Opening the case up, with nightmares of hours of diagnosing in my mind, I was relieved to see that I had simply pulled a wire loose from its connection on the motherboard. In fact, when I closely examined the board, several items had been pulled loose at some point in the process. Another lesson learned: check all of the connections after cleaning up the cables and before closing up the case.

JASON'S TIP *Good cooling is all about moving maximum air volume through your case. Fans should blow in at the front of your case where it's cool and out in the back (or top if you have a vent up there). Having a little more inward fan power than outward has the nice bonus of making air flow out of all the little cracks and crevices in your case, reducing dust buildup.*

That done, I pushed the on button again, and was rewarded by the whine of the system fans and the flickering of the monitor. I immediately pushed the delete key to get into the BIOS, since the hard drive had no information at this point. I didn't worry about tweaking all of the BIOS options to get maximum performance at this point; the key is to first just get it running and stable. I set the BIOS to make sure the system would boot from the CD to install Windows XP.

Having set the CD drive as a boot device, the rest was gravy. Windows XP formatted the drive and installed without a hitch. Now I tweaked the system with optimized BIOS's, BIOS settings, updated motherboard and videocard drivers, etc. Soon I had one big, fast, smooth running home built computer.

Looking back at the experience, my only regret is that I hadn't done this years ago. The new computer is super-fast, and there's a lot of pride in realizing that "I built this." And I proved that any klutz can do it. ●

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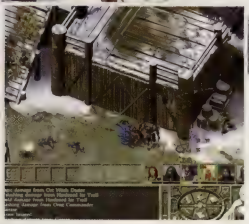


[above] Here barrels are used to herd humans, for food. >>> [above inset] Harpies and Giants in the Mountains. >>> [left inset] Assaulting the goblinoid fort.

# Icewind Dale II

## Once more unto the Dale dear friends!

by Andrew S. Bub

GENRE Role-playing DEVELOPER Black Isle Studios [www.blackisle.com] PUBLISHER Interplay [www.interplay.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER ESRB Teen

**The original** *Icewind Dale* never had a chance. It was released just after the unstoppable *Diablo II* and a couple weeks before *Baldur's Gate II*. Even fans interested in the game were far too busy fighting Bhaal, or foiling Baal, to worry about what Black Isle was up too. Fortunately the fate of the sequel is considerably better; *Neverwinter Nights*, *WarCraft III*, *Morrowind*, and *Dungeon Siege* are all months old, and fans are likely looking for a new role-playing fix right about now. Another stroke of luck is that *Neverwinter Nights*, as good as it is, turned out to be a sharp departure from the style BioWare pioneered in the *Baldur's Gate* series. Some fans missed the real-time strategy/role-playing mix from those games, and *Icewind Dale II* arrives just in time to fill that gap.

Black Isle hasn't just cobbled together another Infinity engine game here; it's updated the engine significantly, converting it to the *D&D* 3rd edition rules, with changes to the skills, feats, spells, and rules. Now any class can develop useful skills, so instead of making a Rogue, you can make a Ranger who has points allocated to Open Locks and Search (and be more useful in combat), or a Paladin who can Hide in Shadows or Sneak around. A Sorcerer who can Power Attack, Blind Fight, or use his Wilderness Lore skill to find tracks, or a Priest who can identify what spells enemy mages are casting. This lends an even greater degree of flexibility to character creation, and that's assuming you don't experiment with switching or dual classing your party. Like *Icewind Dale* before it, you get to create and control all six party members from scratch, only now you can customize them to better suit your playing style.

Spells unleashed!

### Linearity

If only *Icewind Dale II's* storyline wasn't so rigidly linear. Rather than going the open-ended route of *Baldur's Gate II's* infamous Chapter 2 (where you had carte blanche regarding what you wanted to do and when) Black Isle went for something more detailed but much less interesting to repeat.

At least it starts with a bang. Your ship has come into Targos, one of the 10 towns of the *Forgotten Realm*, and it arrives right in the middle of a goblin siege. Quickly your party of first level nobodies is drafted into service and sent to deal with the problem. There are some optional quests here, but they're short. The opening chapter quickly devolves into step and fetch missions, annoyingly petty

Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★½
Maybe ★★★½☆ Mediocre ★★½☆☆ Contemptible ★½☆☆☆

one's at that. Things pick up by the end of the chapter when you realize that one of the innovations Black Isle has introduced to the engine is support for massive unfolding battles. It's a trick carried throughout the game and it yields some truly memorable encounters: A horde of goblins breaking through the Palisade and fighting side by side with Targos's militia; attacking a wrecking crew of ogres trying to sabotage a bridge; trying to stop an orc Shaman's infernal drumming, and wading through orcs, hobgoblins, and trolls to do so.

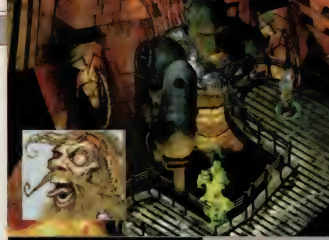
Another new trick is the war drum. Often at the start of an encounter an orc or two will break off and run to a set of drums off screen. If you let them do that their ominous drumming summons wolf-riding goblins into your midst. Black Isle has also countered the trick where you could cautiously move forward and activate a single monster, then back up and kill him at your leisure. Activating one monster often activates them all and that can be suicidal to an unprepared party. The game is considerably more difficult, and even with a balanced party there's too many large-scale encounters in a row. This amounts to a lot of resting, constant reloading of saved games and, until you reach much higher level, frequent and tedious trips back to town to raise a comrade from the dead.

### RTS + RPG + Wargame?

The trade off from a more random adventuring game is that Black Isle's linear storyline allows them to plan the game's encounters. There are ambushes and scripted encounters throughout the game. Terrain is a definite consideration here as well, as enemy archers are often placed in inaccessible or guarded locations on top of cliffs or towers. There are also plenty of hallways, bridges, and doorways for you to use as choke points or trap with flasks of oil or spells like Skull Trap and Glyph of Warding. Retreating to choose your own terrain is often the key to victory. Monsters will chase you all over the map. They've added new features like breakable crates to the game but weren't content to use them to hide goodies, *Diablo* style. Instead they're used as obstacles you have to break through to reach the monsters. Some barrels are explosive—the first time you see an orc fire into one, you'll learn to avoid those kinds of traps. Fans of the combat will be thrilled by the added possibilities.

The game doesn't haphazardly throw monsters at you in an effort to prove that the team has read the *Monster Manual* cover-to-cover. In the beginning you meet goblins, wolves, orcs, ogres, trolls, and, interestingly, plenty of high-level versions of the same. Goblin sorcerers, orc shamans, and goblin super-

My mighty dwarf warrior.



## REVIEWS IN REVIEW

Exploring endless dungeons and slaying slavering dragons

### Baldur's Gate
RATING ★★★★★
OUR WORD "...captures the spirit of AD&D better than any of its predecessors and is as good as it gets in the genre. The next generation of role-playing."

### Baldur's Gate II
RATING ★★★★★
OUR WORD "It's tough to imagine what more you could ask for in a sequel. ...not only meets expectations, but surpasses them. [It's] one of the best role-playing games ever created."

### Birthright: Gorgon's Alliance
RATING ★★★
OUR WORD "...varies from wonderful to atrocious, lacks polish, but contains great gobs of gameplay."

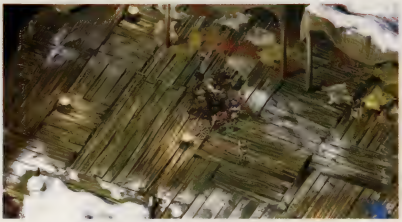
### Descent to Undermountain
RATING ★
OUR WORD "...there's something foul lurking beneath the city of Waterdeep, and it's the people who green-lighted the release of this miserable mess of a game. ...[it's] one of the worst major releases in recent memory. [Interplay] should be ashamed."

### Icewind Dale
RATING ★★★★
OUR WORD "Don't call it a Diablo clone—it deserves a lot better than that. It's a very solid, attractive, and entertaining game, in a very traditional way."

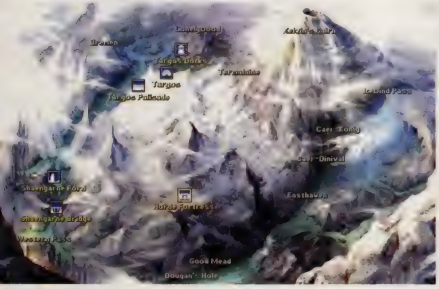
### Neverwinter Nights
RATING ★★★★★
OUR WORD "The most game in a box, potential and actual, since Half-Life. [It's] like a new country with wide-open frontiers."

### Planescape Torment
RATING ★★★★½
OUR WORD "The only limit in this world is the imagination of the game designers, which obviously allows for some intriguing possibilities. ... offers a dark and brooding alternate reality that's captivating and addictive."

### Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor
RATING ★★
OUR WORD "Like so many duds before it, though, it falls short at almost every turn ... the technical problems just add injury to insult. Despite everything it has going for it, it winds up being all wet."



heroes wielding magical bastard swords... there's almost no limit to the combinations provided, and the result is often so many enemies on the screen they're much more of a challenge than a single high-powered beastie. Later in the game, as you grow in power, Black Isle keeps the difficulty level steady (and relentless) as the plot thickens and you face drow, driders, giants, minotaurs, more exotic creatures, and all kinds of bad guys from down below. You have to use the pause key, use spells correctly, target enemies in a coordinated fashion, and rely on




tried and true tactics like Entangle coupled with a Fire Ball, silencing the spell casters, or overstocking on those always-useful Summon Monster Spells, just to survive long enough to inch along to the next high-powered encounter. The result is frustrating almost to a fault, but more satisfying strategically than any *D&D* game to date.

### When adventuring, don a comfortable cloak

There have been some interface changes. As with *Planescape Torment*, Black Isle can't leave what's familiar completely alone. The character portraits are laid out at the bottom right of the screen but the rest of the interface is more or less the same. This leaves more real estate for the action view, but it's jarring for die-hard players. The sound effects are mostly recycled from the earlier games, but they've added more voice clip choices for characters. The portraits are similar to the first *Icewind Dale*, a more visceral artwork style than BioWare uses, more Frank Frazetta than Boris Vallejo.

There's little doubt that this is an Infinity engine game. That's both a good and bad thing. Despite the higher resolutions BioWare added for the now two-year-old *Baldur's Gate II*, *Icewind Dale II* can be safely called a "retro" or even homely game. The Infinity engine is old, and pales in comparison to the fancy engines surrounding it on the store shelves. *Morrowind*, *Freedom Force*, *WarCraft III*, and *Neverwinter Nights*, with their 3D finery make *Icewind Dale II* look scruffy and unkempt. Like a ragged and tattered old robe you used to spend every morning wearing.

But there's something comforting about wearing that robe again, and it feels good to pick it up and wear it again—it's familiar, it's comfortable, and it's been a part of so many great memories. *Icewind Dale II* is a superlative, if a bit retro, role-playing game that no fan of its predecessors should miss. Wargamers might want to take a look as well. It may not look like much, but it's got it where it counts.

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | A return to the glory of the Infinity Engine |
| DOWNSIDE | The engine is clunkier than most will remember it being, linear story |
| RATING | ★★★★½ |

[from top] Lions, tigers and bugbears! >>> The spine of the world! >>> What do you want me to do now?

## Maximum Capacity: Hotel Giant

RATING ★★½☆☆

GENRE Hotel Management Simulation
DEVELOPER Enlight Software
PUBLISHER JoWood Productions
REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator
MULTIPLAYER None ESRB Teen

[above] This extremely plain, low-budget room isn't going to endear itself to many visitors unless you lower the price. >>> If the game focused more on weird things its visitors did, it might be more entertaining.

**After designing and** managing houses, railroads, theme parks, zoos, golf courses, malls, airports, and hospitals, you can now live out your control freak dreams of running a hotel with *Maximum Occupancy*. As with most of the *Tycoon*-styled games, the basic concept is simple: build and design a hotel, maintain a budget, make money, make people happy, wash, rinse, repeat. There are a bunch of scenarios and campaigns, the world's longest tutorial, and plenty of randomness to keep you playing for a seriously long time, assuming, of course, you can stay awake. After an initial attack of, "Hey, this is pretty cool," the game quickly deteriorates into, "Wow, this is really boring."

The box says, "Build. Watch. Manage", and while that's an accurate description of the game, its problem lies in the balance between and implementation of those elements. Building a hotel is half entertaining, in that dollhouse/*feng shui* kind of way, but a few interface glitches involving the facing of objects makes it tedious. It's visually attractive, though 3D adds little to the game beyond forcing you to play, "Position the Camera" too much.

You manage your hotel through an enormous number of clearly designed menus, and all of the interrelationships are pretty clear—developer Enlight Software, of *Capitalism* fame, knows its way around deep strategy games. Unfortunately, the game's goals are uninteresting. Most revolve around increasing market share, profitability, or occupancy rates, and while that may give accountants or efficiency experts and warm and fuzzy feeling, after a while, it becomes a chore.

The fundamental failing of *Hotel Giant* is in the "Watch" portion. Despite having untold possibilities for *Sims*-like voyeurism and visual wackiness, everything about the game is completely devoid of personality. The funniest thing about the game is imagining the ways you can make its publisher's name, JoWood, sound naughty. More of a focus on customers and personalities, using grotesque caricatures and stereotypes, as opposed to a detailed simulation of the realities of running a hotel would have done wonders. Do people want to be the guy that runs the local Ramada Inn or Basil Fawlty from *Fawlty Towers*? —*Steve Bauman*

## Mobile Forces

RATING ★★★½☆

GENRE Action DEVELOPER Rage Software
PUBLISHER Majesco REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-32 Players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

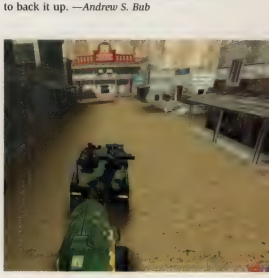
**In the tradition** of *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter*, *Tribes*, *Unreal Tournament*, and *Quake III Arena*, *Mobile Forces* dumps a traditional single-player game in favor of multiplayer-only madness. There's no story, no *raison d'etra*, no *dénouement*, very little *mise-en-scene*.... nothing French at all, in fact, aside from a whole lot of melee and more than a little déjà vu. It's an online shooter using basically realistic weapons and settings to create an arena-style arcade game.

Nobody is going to mistake *Mobile Forces* for *Counter-Strike*. There are your usual deathmatch options, Capture the Flag, and some new modes like Detonation, Trailer, Hold It, and SafeCracker. These are mission-based games that are pretty self explanatory, except maybe for Trailer, which requires you drive an A-Bomb laden trailer to the enemy base.

A shooter lives and dies by its weapons, so it's a pity that *Mobile Forces* doesn't have anything to crow about. Only a knife, shotgun, machine gun, pistol, rocket launcher and a couple mounted weapons are offered. Only the rocket launcher packs a punch, and the combo of launcher plus M4 can't be beat. Like *Counter-Strike* you've got to choose your weapons before you join, the system is based on points, and there's some strategy there, but again Launcher + M4 = only way to go. The vehicles, however, are a terrific addition. There are APCs, buggies, jeeps, and trucks to choose from and the control is well implemented.

*Mobile Forces's* claim to fame it marks the debut of the latest iteration of the *Unreal* engine. The result is a good-looking game with truly magnificent explosions. The physics feel just about right, especially when it comes to the vehicles. You can flip and roll a buggy, you can even shoot out the tires, and if you nail one with a rocket it will fly through the air. Burning wreckage from a detonated vehicle can take out opponents as well as the shooter.

*Mobile Forces* is vanilla near-future sci-fi and this non-descript, and non-story sensibility hurts the game a bit. You can practice and play against bots but even at Elite difficulty, they're terrible at actually playing the game. Against other humans, though, the game is a blast and for that reason alone, it's easy to recommend. But you might want to wait a bit, see if it catches on; it's just not worthwhile without a community to back it up. —*Andrew S. Bub*



High noon on the western map.

GENRE Broken Flight Simulation DEVELOPER Third Wire [www.thirdwire.com] PUBLISHER Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-16 players, LAN ESRB Teen

(above) These mountains are employing a new stealth technology. >>> (below) In a show of solidarity with the U.S., Russian jets shoot each other down.

# Strike Fighters: Project 1

## Another low in the history of computer gaming

by Tom Chick

**The first sign** something's amiss in *Strike Fighters* is found in its Readme.txt file. "This package is provided for press preview purposes only," it says. "The preview build is based on a pre-release code, and as such, it is not at the level of performance and compatibility of the final product. The pre-release code may not operate correctly."

It's quickly apparent that this is the least of *Strike Fighters'* problems. Before a campaign mission, clicking the button to read your briefing shunts you to a blank dead end screen where the only exit is your computer's reset button. The planning map looks like your commanding officer took a crayon to it. Start a campaign mission on the ground and enjoy the wacky dune buggy physics before you figure out you have to start missions in the air, where you can enjoy planes that handle more like hangliders than Vietnam era jets.

Once you're flying around, you get to experience the tedium of long flights to your target area since the jump-to-next-event is one of the many commands that do nothing. The command to bring up the in-game map does nothing. Trying to communicate with your wingmen brings up a menu that serves only to confuse you; although the options are labeled differently, they all accomplish the exact same thing: nothing. The weapons, including early attempts at air-to-air missiles, actually do something because they're super efficient and super deadly. The AI is more than happy to shoot its' own airplanes, fly into the ground, or ignore you.

*Strike Fighters* is supposed to be a survey sim covering early jet fighters with a dynamic campaign. You're supposed to be able to enjoy multiplayer dogfights over the Internet. You're supposed to be able to fly air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. There are supposed to be carrier operations.

Of course, what you're supposed to be able to do is academic when you're busy rebooting your computer after the sim has crashed again. When you're wondering how the radar works, or even if it works, it doesn't really matter that much that the terrain looks pretty good, at least when it's there as occasional chunks are missing. Some of the aircraft don't even have cockpits, giving you the effect of flying Wonder Woman's invisible jet, which probably isn't the effect the developers were going for.

The sound runs in discrete looping chunks of varying volume. Every now and then an aircraft whizzes by and sounds like a space ship. Sometimes wingmen send you messages, but of course you can't respond. When a mission starts, there's a readout at the bottom of the screen that says "Location: Somewhere," which reassures you that the mission isn't set in some Buddhist nirvana or existential state of negation.

The thin manual consists mainly of filler and the backstory for the campaign. The most amusing part is the five-page list of keyboard commands, which are more like wishful thinking than a reference guide.

There's not much point in going on about what's broken/missing/buggy, because the simple fact of the matter is this game is nowhere near being finished. There are, of course, promises to patch it, which might be met with more skepticism if it weren't for the reputation of the lead designer, Tsuyoshi Kawahito, the veteran flight sim designer who created masterpieces like *Jane's Longbow 2* and *European Air War*. It's hard to imagine a man of his talent letting *Strike Fighters* wallow in this pathetic condition, which tests the limits of how badly you're willing to be treated by the company that sells you a computer game. If, after reading this, you give your tacit approval for the state of this game by spending $40 on it, you deserve what you get: another new low in the history of computer gaming.

***Editor's Note:*** *The version of Strike Fighters reviewed was purchased at Wal-Mart. After the game appeared on shelves, Tsuyoshi "TK" Kawahito, of developer Third Wire, posted a message on SimHQ.com that it was based on an unfinished beta. "We were assured that the number of this run is very small," he said. He went on to apologize for the state of the release. "We certainly didn't want it to happen this way."*

*However, Strategy First issued a statement that differed from Kawahito's. 'The company says it's a commercial release, "special only to Wal-Mart." The company insists it's not a beta but a "basic version" that is "targeted towards that specific retailer's audience." They went on to say that those who bought this "basic version" will be able to upgrade for free, either via a patch or a free upgrade CD.*

*Wherever your sympathies may lie in a mess like this, everyone loses. Publishers and developers take a reputation hit, retailers lose confidence in computer games due to returns, and gamers are stuck with half-baked software.*

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | It could be good if it's ever finished |
| DOWNSIDE | It's nowhere near being finished |
| RATING | NO STARS |

## Aliens Versus Predator 2: Primal Hunt

RATING ★½

GENRE Icky Add-on DEVELOPER Third Law Interactive PUBLISHER Sierra/Fox REQUIREMENTS Aliens Versus Predator 2 MULTIPLAYER 2-16 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Mature

**A few hours** of *Primal Hunt* increases your appreciation of Monolith and the original *Aliens Versus Predator 2*. For the expansion, Monolith handed over the design reins to Third Law Interactive, which managed to remove the enjoyable bits from the original and replace them with annoying ones.

With little change to the existing multiplayer outside of the addition of a couple of weapons and a few tweaks, the emphasis is on a new single-player campaign with three separate interlocking storylines. While the stories link up rather nicely, the original's superb pacing and gameplay is thrown out the window, replaced by poorly designed levels and lots of "gotcha" moments. The tension, creepiness, and general ebb and flow of the Marine campaign is replaced by a "pure action, all the time" Corporate one. A few instances of mass alien attacks is entertaining; having them constantly appear ahead and behind you when you cross a certain predetermined location is merely annoying.

The Predator campaign shows little regard for the idea that it's a hunter, again going for the "wave-after-wave of aliens" (and some awful new creatures) approach. The alien mission starts you as a face-hugger with a sadistically difficult run through a Predator-infested environment. The Predators immediately spot you regardless of your cover, and there's no indication from the game that you can only attach yourself to one specific Predator at the end of the level. So you spend literally hours trying to isolate everyone along the way in a futile attempt to face hug 'em, and even if you succeed, the game ends because it wasn't the "right" Predator.

Where the original *Aliens Versus Predator 2* is a collection of great individual moments resulting in an overall great game, *Primal Hunt* is a collection of annoying "Quickload" moments resulting in a thoroughly annoying game. —*Steve Bauman*

[above] This guy seems transported in from KISS Psycho Circus. >>> [left] Some of the combat is still pretty exciting, though not enough to make up for the add-on's general sub-mediocrity.

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# MoonBase Commander

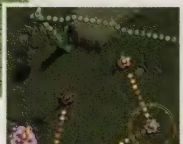
## Classic light-strategy for all ages

by William Abner

GENRE Turn-based Strategy DEVELOPER Humongous Entertainment [www.funkidsgames.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

**In an industry** chock full of clones, semi-clones, and downright rip offs, *MoonBase Commander* is the kind of game that grabs you by the collar, giving you a shake as if to say, "Pay attention. I am something new." The gameplay is simple, and grasping the basic mechanics takes only a matter of minutes. However, it's putting the rules into practice that provides the challenge.

At the start of a game, each player has one lone Hub unit, which possesses the ability to create any of the other 18 units in the game. Each unit type costs a specific amount of energy to build, and once you run out of energy your turn ends. If you have the energy to build a unit you manually "launch" the unit from a Hub. The first step in doing this is to aim where you wish the unit to go by rotating the direction pointer on the Hub. Pressing the mouse button launches the unit, and the longer you hold the button, the farther the unit travels, with the ultimate goal being to launch units and maneuver into position to destroy your opponent. The tricky part is that nearly every unit remains attached to its Hub by a colorful umbilical cord. The cords cannot cross each other, and if you ever lose your main Hub unit everything else you own will explode along with it.



[above] One explosion can cause a nice chain reaction. >>> [right] The orange player begins to launch a new unit from a Hub. >>> [far right]Terrain can vary widely from map to map.

The 18 units in the game all have a specific use, from the basic defense of the Anti Air unit to the highly annoying attack of the cord-killing "Strike" weapon. This may sound a bit dull but it actually balances the scale as each player has access to the same toys. There's no excuse when you lose. Your decisions drive the game, not a special super unit that is only available to a specific faction. There's no tech-tree or anything of that nature as each commander has access to all of the units right off the bat.

The 2D graphics are bright and colorful and while not on par with big budget games, they are functional. Explosions are impressive, as are other effects such as when a shield absorbs a missile blast or when a Crawler unit self-destructs. The sound is impressive as each faction has its own excellent voice samples. In fact, there's nothing in the game that screams, "budget title"; everything is polished and professionally done.

Options include a single player campaign and skirmish mode. The campaign is a set of 16 scenarios that escalate in difficulty and skirmish mode gives you access to over 40 maps and 10 unique AI opponents. Adjustable wind conditions make launching units and weapons highly problematic, and you can disable Fog of War to make locating enemy units a bit easier. Those looking for a faster game may place a time limit from 15-60 seconds per player turn. There's also an easy to use map editor included in the package.

The biggest design gaff is the lack of a save game feature. A four-player game can take hours to complete and without a way in which to save your game you're out of luck if you need to quit. The game supports 2-4 player multiplayer, but finding a game outside of a home network is a pain. Direct TCP/IP is not officially supported, so you must register and log into GameSpy Arcade to find other players. Unfortunately, hot-seat mode is not available, and that's a feature that should simply be in every turn based game.

Don't let its budget price fool you, *MoonBase Commander* is an incredibly entertaining game regardless of its price tag and quirky online support. It's easy to learn yet each game plays out differently due to the airtight design. It's a winner, and one of the better strategy games of the year. Don't let it pass you by.

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | Clean and elegant design, attractive graphics, excellent sound, right price |
| DOWNSIDE | Can't save a game in progress, multiplayer matchmaking is a pain, no hot-seat mode |
| RATING | ★★★★½ |

[left] Fu Su is typical RPG character in an atypical RPG world.

# Prince of Qin

## There were funky Chinamen, from funky Chinatown

by Brett Todd

GENRE Historical Role-Playing DEVELOPER Object Software [www.objectsw.com] PUBLISHER Strategy First [www.strategyfirst.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-500 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Teen

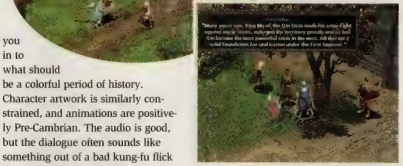
**There is something** to be said for sticking to what you know. Object Software proves the reliability of that old saw with *Prince of Qin*, a solid role-playing epic that takes place in the same ancient Chinese setting as the company's previous efforts, *Dragon Throne: Battle of Red Cliffs* and *Fate of the Dragon*. The Beijing-based developer—you were expecting Wichita?—has tossed Chinese history, fantasy archetypes, and a whole lot of hacking and slashing into a blender and come up with *Dungeon Siege* on the Yangtze River.

Object has done a great job with the Sesame Street gameplay common to action-first role0playing, and added a compelling story to boot. There's no complaining about the involving narrative, which remains fascinating to follow despite the fact that you do little but right-click your way through one corpse-strewn quest after another. You play Fu Su, a prince struggling with his brother Hu Hai (Fu Su and Hu Hai—now there's the stuff of a really good knock-knock joke) to see who succeeds his father as emperor. After ignoring a forged imperial decree ordering him to commit suicide, Fu Su goes on the run and attempts to clear his name.

While historical fact and the plot diverge early on (Fu Su actually did kill himself, so a by-the-book rendition would have been awfully short), Object has taken pains to provide an appropriate setting. The surroundings are based on Chinese history and mythology, filtered through role-playing sensibilities. So even though the game is centered on basics like FedEx quests and battling through dungeons choked with monsters, authentic touches make everything seem fresher than it really is. Hundreds of supporting characters and non-player characters fill you in on historical events, providing a backstory of such depth that it seems out of place given the simplistic gameplay. The combat system is based on the ancient Chinese theory that holds everything to be made of the Five Elements of water, wood, fire, earth, and metal. This lends a strategic dimension to play, because each element has a rival and a companion that it enhances. For example, a water-based weapon is best against a fire-based monster. Conversely, wood can be used to enhance the effects of fire. As a paladin, Fu Su can manufacture weapons, so knowing how the Five Elements interact is crucial.

Enough of the familiar has been preserved so that you're not overwhelmed by all the newness. There are five character classes cribbed from the D&D gold standard—paladin, muscleman, assassin, wizard, and witch—and each comes with a full list of standard attributes, skills, and the expected paper doll interface. Fu Su can form a party by recruiting up to four followers. Online multiplayer mode provides typical, *Diablo*-style play and a more powerful option where users can set up official game servers hosting up to 500 people simultaneously. Overall, there should be a lot to do here, both on the net and off.

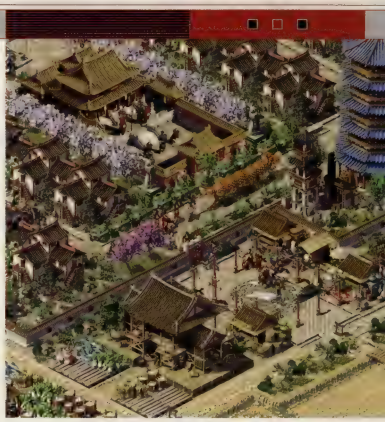
Basement-level production values are an issue at times, though. Object seems to be working with software that's as dated as a Monica Lewinsky joke. Although there is 3D support, its effect on the appearance of the game is minimal. Visuals are generally flat. Lifeless backgrounds and a limited number of terrain types do little to draw you in to what should be a colorful period of history. Character artwork is similarly constrained, and animations are positively Pre-Cambrian. The audio is good, but the dialogue often sounds like something out of a bad kung-fu flick beneath even the likes of Jackie Chan. Judging by their horrible enunciation when it comes to everything but proper Chinese names, it's unlikely that any of these actors could claim English as their first language.



[left] Hack and slash your way to the throne. >>> [above] Lengthy dialogue provides a history lesson on ancient China.

The saga of Fu Su may be engaging, the gameplay mechanics innovative, and the action fast-flowing and exciting, but the uncanny shortage of *Diablo* fans with an interest in the obscurities of Chinese history probably limits the game's appeal. Which is fine if you're only interested in the single-player campaign, but it looms as a real problem if you're hoping to get into some 500-player multiplayer matches. But since the solo adventure is worth the price of admission all on its lonesome, it really isn't much of a drawback.

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | Good hack-and-slash role-playing with depth and an historical twist |
| DOWNSIDE | Game is set in ancient China, graphics are set in the might-as-well-be-ancient late 1990s |
| RATING | ★★★★½ |



An annual New Year's celebration helps keep your citizens happy; the average city bustles with so much activity that it is often fun to simply sit back and watch.

# Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom

## Only Caesar could go to China?

by Benjamin E. Sones

GENRE Turn-based Strategy DEVELOPER Humongous Entertainment [www.funkidsgames.com] PUBLISHER Infogrames [www.infogrames.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB Everyone

**Impressions has carved** a niche for itself making one very specific type of game. The City Building series lets you play urban planner for a variety of ancient civilizations such as Rome, Egypt, Greece, and now China. *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom* is not an Impressions design; they farmed the project out to Breakaway Games. If the Breakaway logo were not on the box, however, you would never guess that Impressions was not at the helm. In fact, if you have experience with other games in the series, you can save yourself some reading with this capsule evaluation: *Emperor* is another City Building game. Take that for what it's worth.

The game covers several thousand years of ancient Chinese history, from the Neolithic Xia Dynasty all the way up the Jurchen Jin occupation of Northern China. It's split into a series of stand-alone campaigns, each tied to a specific dynasty. Each scenario puts you in charge of building a city; sometimes you work from the ground up, sometimes you take the reigns in an existing city. Scenarios have different goals—you may need to have a certain number of people living in a certain type of housing, or meet some sort of production challenge, or build a monument, or conquer your foes. The campaigns provide a pleasant sense of continuity, sometimes sending you back to a city that you had previously built to accomplish new goals. If you play them chronologically, they do a fair job easing you into some of the more complex mechanics as you progress from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age to the Steel Age. This, along with the varied goals, keeps the scenarios fresh and interesting.

Designing and growing your city is the heart of the game, and the rather complex dynamic is nearly identical to that of past City Building games. You build streets and blocks of housing, and then provide services (food, medicine, religion, luxury items, etc.) to make your citizen's lives better so that your city evolves. Houses grow larger and more ornate and hold more people that you can put to work in new services that make your houses grow even larger and more ornate, provided that they have an aesthetically pleasing environment (would you want to live next door to a steel furnace?). Sometimes—much of the time, actually—your scenario map lacks some of the resources that you need to satisfy your citizens. In that case, you need to get what you want through trade or conquest of neighboring cites. The formula feels very familiar, and that is either a good or a bad thing, depending on how much you like the formula.

Online multiplayer is *Emperor's* Big New Feature. While it's obvious the developers lavished a lot of attention upon it, the solo game is much more fun. There is nothing wrong with the multiplayer mode—it works rather well, and is difficult to imagine how to make it better. The problem is more fundamental. *Emperor* is a game about building, one in which you might want to stop and consider whether this flowering cherry tree might look nice placed next to that Siheyuan, or whether this plot of land offers good Feng Shui potential (yes, the game really does model Feng Shui, and it's important).

Competitive multiplayer scenarios turn it into a race. Each player gets a city, and the first player to meet the scenario's goals wins. If you pause to admire your city, that won't be you. Cooperative scenarios are better, but in both types of scenario, the players interact only at a distance; Player A has his map, and you have yours. It is less like playing a game with someone than it is like playing a game near someone.

Perhaps Breakaway would have done better to focus their creative energies on providing better pathfinding and more precise tools to herd your "walkers" (they provide your citizens with goods and services) or control combat (which is still clunky at best). Either way, you still get a solid bit of urban planning in an interesting new setting. Again.

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | They have had seven games with which to perfect this formula, which now includes multiplayer |
| DOWNSIDE | After seven games, you may be growing a bit tired of it, and the multiplayer is less interesting than the solo game |
| RATING | ★★★½ |

(left) The player models look fantastic. >>> (below) The new player progression model is tied to how players perform in the pre season.

# Madden NFL 2003

## The triumphant return of PC football

by William Abner

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

GENRE Football DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER EA Sports [www.easports.com] REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64 MB RAM MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, LAN ESRB E

**After years of** lagging behind the consoles, the 2003 edition of *Madden* is a shocking success, outperforming its console brethren at nearly every turn. It's the best football game you can buy, regardless of platform.

The gameplay is fantastic; players tend to perform to their ratings and everything simply feels right. Defensive back AI, an area that's been a thorn in the series' side for years, is better than ever before, forcing you to actually read basic defensive converges. The computer offensive AI calls a myriad of plays, and no longer looks to go deep at the drop of a hat. The computer quarterbacks look underneath, using its backs and tight ends to near perfection. The computer is (finally) able to run the ball effectively. If you go into Pittsburgh with a weak run defense you can expect The Bus and company to run down your throat.

Several new off the field features help enhance the package. The Mini Camp allows you to practice every part of the game, from throwing accuracy to shedding blockers as a defensive lineman. Rookies available in the draft each year show things such as 40-yard dash time, bench press weight, etc. This adds a lot to the draft, as you never see a youngster's real numbers; it also adds the new dimension of unknowingly drafting a bust. The new AI slider settings are now on a 100-point scale, and the larger range aids in helping fine-tune your game.

Franchise mode has a pre-season schedule so you get a chance to see rookies and backups perform and the new player progression model is directly related to the pre-season, so if a young player performs well he may get a nice boost to his ratings when the official campaign starts. Perhaps the best addition is the accelerated clock that allows you to play full 15-minute quarters without scoring 200 points per game. (This feature is exclusive to the PC version.)

With the retirement of the aging and monotone Pat Summerall, Al Michaels steps in the booth alongside John Madden to call the games. Michaels adds new energy to the play calling but Madden, unfortunately, is just as one-dimensional as ever and many of his one-liners are identical to earlier editions. Crowd audio still needs work as fans boo after the home team scores and go quiet at odd times (as in when an opposing kicker lines up for a game winning field goal.)

Visually, *Madden 2003* has no equal; it's even prettier than the PS2 and Xbox versions. There are several new running, catching, and tackling animations that help make the gameplay look more realistic. Runners still tend to get hung up on blockers a bit too frequently and player faces look a tad strange, but overall there's very little to grumble about in how the game looks.

There are two main complaints: first off the general manager AI is woefully insufficient. It's too easy to trade for good players and the AI never signs free agents during the season or places players on Injured Reserve, which makes it too easy for you to snatch up any available player(s) you wish (salary cap permitting.) Secondly, Online Franchise mode is gone. In its place is EA's new online service, EA Sports Online (EASO), a pay-to-play service that charges $4.95 a month after the first 60 days (the subscription covers any and all EA games, however.) You can still play direct Internet games for free, but if you want to use EA's lobby and all of the features of EASO, you need to pony up the five bucks. The ability to play an online franchise league is one of the things that help make the PC version of *Madden* unique and removing it is downright baffling.

If *Madden 2003* is any indication, the days of the PC being the sports game whipping boy may finally be coming to a close. This is a game that shows off the power of the personal computer as a platform for sports gaming. It looks fantastic, is a blast to play, and is the best football game out there, period.

| | |
|---|---|
| UPSIDE | Excellent gameplay; top-shelf graphics; the rookie scouting reports, accelerated clock, and mini camps are all fine additions |
| DOWNSIDE | Online franchise play is surprisingly absent; very weak CPU General Manager AI; mediocre sound; no play editor |
| RATING | ★★★★½ |

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# OUT of the BOX

## warcraft III goes mainstream

### What Blizzard's blockbuster and a wet T-shirt kiss have in common

**Approximately 4.5 million** copies of *WarCraft III: Reign of Chaos* were shipped to stores worldwide at the start of July. Over a million of these had been sold by the time we flipped our calendars over, making it clear that (a) Blizzard Entertainment knows its audience, and (b) this game is hotter than corduroy pants at the beach. If registers keep ringing, expect the game to hit the *Frampton Comes Alive* cultural saturation level sometime before Thanksgiving.

Mod community support is one of the big reasons why *WarCraft III* means more to today's kids than Jesus. Even though mainstream popularity has made the game one of 2002's pop culture touchstones—it's almost on a par with Kylie Minogue's white dress and Mary-Jane kissing Spider-Man in a downpour—Blizzard hasn't forgotten the core geek crowd that put the company on top in the first place.

"We definitely wanted to specifically support the mod community by shipping a complete and easy-to-use editor with the game," explains Blizzard vice-president Bill Roper. "The level designers on *WarCraft III* worked very closely with the editor programmers to make the tool kit friendly for people looking to lay out levels, change the functionality of the game, and even find new games to create using *WarCraft III* as a launching pad. We basically went to people from the mod community to ensure that our world editor would be well used by the mod community."

"Well used" is an understatement. Droves of modders have been tinkering with *Warcraft III* since its release. Leading fan sites like warcraftIII.net and warcraft.org post a slew of new mods, maps, and mini-games each and every day. Nearly 500 different files were posted in the first six weeks of the game's release. Most importantly, this avalanche of zip files includes various types of mods, some inconsequential like pebbles, others on the scale of boulders. Ranking with the former are mini-games such as Lanardo's take on '80s arcade classic *Frogger* and PelleTM's wholly goofy *SuperSplatt Racing*—proof positive that you can do just about anything with that editor. Of more lasting appeal are mods in the latter category. This includes some truly innovative maps such as Keevan's 2v2v2 or 3v3 Ice Canyon and role-playing campaigns such as Kaggz's epic (full storyline, a dozen cutscenes, and new hero classes, mini-games, and music) *Shadows of Evil*. Both are favorites of Roper, though he cautions that so many mods are being released every day that it's impossible for him to give an up-to-date account of what he's enjoying the most.

Aside from simply wanting to provide gamers with the best bang for their buck, Blizzard made sure that the mod community was supported because of longevity factors. A million-sale opening and dozens of great mods in the first weeks of the game's release may be spectacular, but long-term viability is also crucial. Roper and the design team sought to make a game that would be as impressive to consumers a year from now as it was on the day that it first hit shelves.

"In the vast majority of cases, the longevity of a game is directly proportional to the amount of new content or new challenges presented to the player. This can be accomplished in many ways, such as randomness of content, expansion sets, growing a game world with a live support team, releasing new maps, and so forth. The mod community brings a player-driven addition of new content that can run independently of the development team and in many cases can respond more quickly to the interests of the gamers."

Seeing as the "player-driven addition of new content" has been steadily rising for the past few months, there is no reason to think that *Warcraft III* players won't be enjoying new mods for a long time to come. Expect a stream of maps and modifications up until Blizzard ships *Warcraft IV*, which will undoubtedly boost sales figures to the point that counting units shipped will require some new form of math. ●

## I Never Drink...Wine

User-made adaptations of classic *Dungeons & Dragons* modules are starting to arrive for *Neverwinter Nights*. Raven Builder's The Spires of Ravenloft is a fresh take on the classic 1983 *Ravenloft* module written by Tracy and Laura Hickman in their pre-*Dragonlance* days. It brings players back to the cursed land of Barovia to do battle once more with George Hamilton wannabe Count Strahd von Zarovich. Although the module was designed with a large party in mind, characters between seventh and tenth level may be able to handle the undead-haunted castle of Strahd on their own. Bret "ShadeRaven" Davenport (no relation, I presume) spent his summer making The Keep on the Borderlands. This updated look at one of the earliest *D&D* modules presents players with a reawakened Caves of Chaos. For more on The Spires of Ravenloft, Keep on the Borderlands, and many, many other modules for *Neverwinter Nights*, keep an eye on both the official Bioware website and IGN's Neverwinter Vault.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS OFFICIAL SITE
nwn.bioware.com
NEVERWINTER VAULT
nwvault.ign.com

## You Look Wonderful Tonight

*Age of Wonders II* is developing quite a cult following. The best efforts of that community can be found at Age of Wonders II Heaven, a fan site that serves as the game's unofficial home on the web. More than two dozen user-crafted scenarios are available there. Many shift lands from other fantasy settings into the Triumph game, so you can play in J.R.R. Tolkien's Gondor and Mordor as envisioned by Uruloki, Balance's take on ancient Europe, and Camelrider's update of the world of Xeen from *Might & Magic IV* and *V*. While you're at Age of Wonders II Heaven, be sure to pick up the official Death Swamp and The Marching Desert scenarios, which were originally available as a perk for those who preordered the game.

AGE OF WONDERS II OFFICIAL SITE
aow2.godgames.com/welcome.html
AGE OF WONDERS II HEAVEN
aow2.heavengames.com

## Evel Knievel Does Organized Crime

Mod tools for *Grand Theft Auto III* have come a long way in the past few months. A good indication of just how far they've come is on display in z9online's SkyPark, which boasts a nearly vertical boulevard leading to a park about a thousand feet above Portland. Said park includes a pair of aptly named "suicide ramps" where you can launch yourself into the blue. Another great car mod is Odie's Ultimate Stunt-Park. It provides an automotive playground featuring a number of all-new objects, including terrain, a bridge, a half-pipe, a coaster, and loops. Hit some of them just right and you'll fly far enough to cross two Snake River Canyons...and maybe nudge noses with the space shuttle. New textures are also used, giving the mod even more of a different look than the out-of-the-box game. The only downside to all this is the absence of a good download site for *GTA III* mods. To track these and other mods down, you're best off going to GTA3Forums.com and browsing through the Modification Showroom section.

GTA3FORUMS.COM
www.gta3forums.com

## Silent but Deadly

The good people at SUBSIM Review are working on multiplayer updates for glub-glub sims *Silent Hunter II* and *Destroyer Command*. Projekt Messerwetzer (that's German for a craftsman who sharpens old knives, dummy) aims at upgrading the online multiplayer code from the rTime system that shipped with the games to Microsoft's DirectPlay. Work is proceeding towards an expected release date in the fall. For more, go to the Projekt Messerwetzer website, or check in with the regular news updates at SUBSIM Review.

PROJEKT MESSERWETZER OFFICIAL SITE
www.subsim.com/ssr/p_messerwetzer.htm
SUBSIM REVIEW
www.subsim.com

### BARGAIN BIN

**Rails Across America**

Flying Lab Software's *Rails Across America* plays like a board game on your monitor, and now it carries with it a board-game price of just $10. The railroad builder never caught on with the public, so take advantage of somebody else's misfortune and enjoy one of the best strategy games of 2001 for less than the cost of a pizza. [Strategy First/2001]

The dead walk in The Spires of Ravenloft. >>> Relive a classic in Keep on the Borderlands >>> z9online's SkyPark for Grand Theft Auto III looks down on skyscrapers

It seems that censorship is on the minds of readers based on the article "Muted" by Robert de los Reyes in the September issue. John Prezioso thinks it's "common sense" to fine retailers for selling M-rated games to minors. The bigger issue, though, is whether you want the government involved in policing the game business. Should the stores internally handle this matter, with the ESRB handing out fines, or should the government do it? We also had a lot of feedback about "late" reviews, with most chiming in for accuracy over timeliness, though Andrew Heffron wondered why the review of Desert Siege for Ghost Recon was so late. "[It was] worse than useless," he said. That was just a victim of timing. The game came in late from the publisher, it got cut from one issue, etc. Plus piracy, CD checks, T&A… these are our readers.

## Mute Censorship

When I first heard of Judge Limbaugh's decree stating that videogames do not convey ideas in any meaningful way, I laughed ["Muted," CGM 142]. Rubbish! I went on to discover that he was ruling in a case involving the IDSA's challenge of an ordinance declaring it a crime to sell violent videogames to minors. It occurred to me that the IDSA's stance could be perceived as a desire to allow minors play ultra-violent or sexually graphic videogames, and the more I thought about it, the more uneasy I felt. Then it hit me: they sounded just like the American Library Association when they demanded to be able to show porn to minors in libraries because it was "information" and it could not be restricted! What is the IDSA thinking?

I know, I know. "Freedom of speech," right? This does not mean that you or anyone else is free to express any idea in any context utterly free of restriction. Moreover, restriction and censorship are utterly and completely different concepts. Censorship in any form is wrong, period.

Having said that, freedom of speech does not mean you have a God-given right to show my children images of homosexuality or bestiality. It means that government may not prosecute you for viewing or possessing such material if you so choose. Like it or not, government has the right (and the obligation) to restrict any expression of ideas when they can be inappropriate for or harmful to certain groups of people.

Look, I'm not saying that this hysteria over videogame violence isn't horrendously overblown. *DOOM* did not make a couple of otherwise sane kids blow away their classmates in Columbine. And videogames clearly can be deep, thought-provoking works of art. But are we prepared to say to the world that we want little kids machine-gunning pedestrians and picking up hookers in *Grand Theft Auto III*? Lets get a grip here folks. Making someone pay a fine for knowingly selling an "M-rated" game to a nine-year old in Electronics Boutique is not an attack on our freedoms. It's common sense.

**John Prezioso**

When specifically referring to images and "art," who decides what's inappropriate and harmful, individuals or governments?—ed

## More Mute Feedback

After reading the "Muted" article, I knew that because videogames would no longer be "free speech," and that no one could say, "Videogames made me do it." It is a step in the right direction.

Furthermore, I would like those ESRB ratings to mean something. I'm tired of logging on *Ultima Online* and constantly seeing "this is my eight year old's character, please be nice to him/her" in people's profiles when in fact the game has a "Teen" rating. The ratings should be enforced because it is not appropriate for children to see half-naked people running around and blood splatter every which way. There is a certain time in life when it's time to use a little protection, and I think the ESRB (if enforced) works just fine.

**PitViperK**

## Waiting

Re: "Late and Out of Date" ["Upfront,"

CGM 142], I appreciate the fact that *CGM* takes the necessary time to properly review a game. I will not buy a game I am interested in unless it is given a high rating in your magazine.

Now that I have read the latest issue, I am happy to be taking a trip to purchase *Neverwinter Nights*.

**Jason McLaughlin**

## Precious Metals

I think that Steve Bauman hit the nail on the head. I would much rather read a review that is complete and finished than one that's half-baked.

Thank you for your open and honest opinions. Keep up the good work.

**Steven Pierce**

## Wisdom

I don't rush to buy any game, until I've first read reviews I can count on, ones written by people who have actually played a game enough to have a worthwhile opinion. Rushing to be first with a review does an enormous disservice to consumers, something that might not soon be forgotten or forgiven. Wiser to be the best rather than the first. More often than not, the two are mutually exclusive.

**Brian Anderson**

## Puzzling Orientation

I read with interest Steve Bauman's September "Upfront" column. What is so puzzling about his sexual orientation?

**Larry Sherman**

This would be in reference to the sentence, "Other

readers question our sexual orientation, which is always puzzling…" which is wonderfully, and unintentionally, ambiguous. —ed

## Box Stuff

In response to what Mark Lahren said about how game developers should put more stuff in the box ["Rebound," CGM 142, "Adding Value"], I agree more than 100%! I remember the good old days when manuals were like encyclopedias and the box always had something in it: a map of the game world, a couple of plastic toy soldiers, a metallic figurine, or hell, a poster.

Mark Lahren, you are not alone.

**ElGuybrush Musayev**

## More Stuff

I totally agree with Mark Lahren about adding value to the game and offsetting the loss due to software piracy by simply putting more stuff in the box.

Suppose you are a causal pirate (like I was just a couple of years ago) and you already have the full version of *Fallout III* installed on your ultimate gaming PC. Honestly, could you (or anyone?) resist sprinting to the retail store and buying a box that contains a poster depicting Western shore blasted to ashes, one brown spiral-bound manual with genuine photos of fallout boy, and one fuzzy painting?

I didn't think so. In fact, I'm drooling with green radioactive substance right now.

**Ivan Zaigralin**

## CD-less Gaming

I was reading "CD Not Found" by Tom Chick in your September issue, and I would like to say to him, Tom, give America's economy a hand and pay your electricity bill. Second, clean your desk, it's a good spot to store munchies and other snacks in case you don't feel like getting up for lunch. Third, have you ever heard of Morpheus or KaZaA? If not, you're missing out on a lot of free, CD-less, for-the-moment-legal, gaming. After following these steps, you'll probably find out that CDs aren't so bad, as long as you don't have to use them.

By the way, I'm always open for free stuff if you really want to get rid of those pesky CDs of yours.

**Nick Beske**

How are CD-less games downloaded from Morpheus or KaZaA legal? That's even more puzzling than my sexual orientation. —ed

## (Not so) SafeDisc

The SafeDisc issue is one I have been bothered with for quite some time. I would like to point out a few other things the article did not mention:

Whenever I add a new drive letter (through disc partitioning, external devices, etc.), SafeDisc-protected games do not recognize the CD-ROM drive, and I end up reinstalling them. Some games (most notably *Morrowind*) experience a significant degradation of quality due to the protection. Bethesda recognized it and removed the protection in a later patch. I use a laptop for playing games, so hauling a dozen CDs with me wherever I go is a pain. Many game CDs produce excess noise in high-speed drives, comparable only to a jet fighter. That does not add to the game experience, either.

Due to this situation, most of my friends and I are basing our purchase decisions on the availability of patches that remove SafeDisc protection. In a sense, this kind of protection is counter-productive, as it results in lower sales.

**Jozef Purdes**

## Crooks!

I agree wholeheartedly that game makers have penalized those of us who have never pirated a game, and lumped us all together as potential crooks... it's very frustrating. Good job, Mr. Chick. Loved the article! More of these please!

**Suzan M. Ward**

## Vampire Fan

Okay now, Tom Chick reviewed *Blood Omen 2* [CGM 142]. Could it have been a lot better? Yes, but you didn't need to slam it. I don't think you know very much about Vampires, so in that aspect you were not good to review this game. As far as how good the game was and how well it was created, I suppose you were right on, although I did enjoy it while I played it.

By the way, put a stake in it it's done, oh brother. It wouldn't be so bad if you knew that a wooden stake doesn't really kill vampires, it just immobilizes them.

**Johnny Bravo**

## Afflecked

In a world where our hobby/habit/passion or addiction as the case may be is marginalized as childish or counterproductive, seeing someone outside the industry admitting to having finished *StarCraft* and the other *WarCraft* games is more than a little refreshing. Frankly, I also have a better image of Ben Affleck after his blip in your September 2002 issue ["What Are You Playing?"].

**Seth Hensley**

## SEABEE Jeebies

I noticed in the review of *Uncommon Valor* [CGM 142], Tom Chick stated, "…little island engineers knocked over jungle to build an airstrip." Engineers were in the Army and located in Europe. SEABEES are a part of the Navy and were in the Pacific during WW2I doing that type of work. Let's get it correct for those who served.

**Bob Shurdut**

## More T&A

Yes! Yes! *YES*! I heartily agree with Rene Ochoa Dorado when he says he wants more T&A in *CGM* ["Rebound," CGM 142, "Speaking for All"]! He does, indeed, speak for all of us! Tacos & Anchovies, the ultimate gamer snack!

The paucity of culinary coverage on this issue boggles the mind and must be remedied posthaste! Although I am a bit puzzled when he adds in his P.S. that he wants "only girl T&A". Do female anchovies taste better? And how do you tell the difference between the anchovy genders? Perhaps your technical staff should get cracking on this...

**Dave Deckard**

Jason Cross is hard at work on a proper culinary benchmark. Expect "FoodMark 2003" to be released "when it's (well) done." —ed


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# road to nowhere

## i c starz

### Do ratings cripple the sales of above-average products?

**On Wednesday** May 29, 2002, Mandy-Rae Cruickshank of the Performance Freediving Team set a new world record in Static Apnea for women. Mandy-Rae successfully surpassed Karoline Dal Toé's Static record of 6:13 by holding her breath for six minutes and 16 seconds.

We expect Haile Gebrselassie of Ethiopia to run the first sub-two hour-five-minute marathon—breaking the record of 2:05:42 by Moroccan-born American Khalid Khannouchi.

We're comfortable using time as a reliable unit with which to measure performance. But how about this? And now the marks for artistic presentation: 5.8, 5.9, 5.9, 5.8, 6.0, 6.0, 6.0—and the gold medal goes to…Elvis Stojko of Canada. Artistic presentation: difficult to quantify? Absolutely. It's matter of taste, they say.

Love of measurement and quantification goes way back. "Me scratch many moons on cave wall with stick." We're a species transfixed in a "mine-is-bigger-than-yours" type of mentality. We've wholeheartedly embraced ratings systems across the board—Epicurean Palace, five forks; Pizza Hut, one-and-a-half forks. *A Beautiful Mind*, five forks, er, stars. *You'll Never Wiez in the Town Again*, not rated at this writing. But what if you're actually anticipating *You'll Never Wiez in the Town Again*? After all…an all-star cast—Pauly Shore, Carrot Top—it doesn't get much better than that. Let's go wild; let's say it gets two and half stars. If you routinely glaze over anything rated below three stars, you're probably gonna pass. So how do the underdogs stand a chance? What about titles like *Jackass: The Movie*? Doesn't it have rights too?

This publication did not always provide numeric ratings along with its game reviews. Our philosophy was, "Let the review stand on its own. The insightful reader will figure it out." But you wanted ratings, so we gave you ratings. To simplify matters, we began with a one to five star rating, in order to avoid having to differentiate between numbers like 6.3 and 6.7. Then, to complicate matters, much like some of our competitors, we broke down our ratings (online only) into its production area subsets, such as Sound, Gameplay, Replayability, Number of Animals Harmed, Graphics, etc. and then averaged those scores to give a final rating. This lasted for about ten minutes as we realized that the average rating usually in no way reflected the overall quality of the product.

Then we heard complaints that the final rating we provided was not the average of the subset numbers, so to re-simplify things, we dropped the subsets altogether. Is keeping the numerical ratings really a good idea though? Publishers or PR representatives will call us the second they believe anyone might have had time to review their game, asking, "What did it get? What did it get?"

"It got played. And rated!" we assure them.

"Five, right? It got five."

< silence >

"Four-and-a-half, right?"

< silence >

"Oh, *tell* me it didn't even get four-and-a-half?"

"Didn't *even* get a four-and-a-*half*?!" we shout. "Why, a score of *three* is actually a very respectable score!"

"Not in my book it isn't." < mumbles an obscenity >

Can every game be a *Diablo*, a *Warcraft III*, a *Civilization*, an *Age of Empires*, or any other certifiable hit? Well of course not, or there would be no sense in reviews at all. And that's sort of the point.

Who reviews these games but hardcore gamers? And who but hardcore gamers are probably way too hyper-critical, with some pretty highfalutin' ideas about what is and isn't quality? And who follows the industry enough not to really need reviews at all? Other hard-core gamers. They know what they want, when it's coming out, and pretty much whether or not it will be good, or they'll buy it anyway because it's *Phasers on Stun IX* and *Phasers I–VIII* blew them away—regardless of the ratings. These gamers are a no-contest sale. They have their fingers on the pulse of the industry. They are the pre-orderers. It's the casual gamers that become effected by the ratings. Or in the case of gift-giving, it's their friends and their families.

So the casual gamer reads several hard-core reviews: 75%, 3.0, 6.8… etc. and feel a bit queasy about making a purchase. "Waaaaait a minute. 75 is not even a C+," they reason. And they buy something with a score of 95%. But wait. 75% is quite above average. And doesn't that often indicate a very respectable product? Especially if we agree that the number is perhaps even more subjective than the descriptive opinion? What then happens to the really solid, entertaining titles that don't have a Blizzard or a Microsoft behind them? What about the *Kohans* and the *Startopias* of the world? A lot of people loved these reputable titles, and certainly other titles of their ilk might have sold a whole lot more units were it not for the blasted ratings. As I said, the hardcore folks are already sold. But as the Evil Score starts wending its way amongst the hapless casual and mainstream folks like some swollen, diseased serpent, a lot becomes at stake that didn't have to be. ●

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PHIL STEINMEYER

# INSIDE the sausage factory

## bad predictions

### Don't sue me when I'm wrong

**The beautiful thing** about making predictions in print is that by the time your predictions have proven to be horribly inaccurate, the magazine containing said predictions is buried in a cardboard box in the garage, and the columnist never refers to the predictions again. If, by some minor miracle, the columnist actually hits a prediction accurately, he will of course dig his saved column out of his scrapbook, and trumpet it loudly to all his peers. "Who's the man, who's the man!!!!" Not that *I* would ever do anything like that, of course.

So as we head into the Christmas season, here are my predictions for the next 12 months of the gaming biz:

**Nvidia Wins:** Since defeating 3Dfx in the 3D chipset war a couple years ago, Nvidia has reigned largely unchallenged, roughly tripling the power of its chips every year. This summer, Matrox and ATI are touring magazines showing off what appear to be the strongest challengers Nvidia has faced since 3Dfx's demise. Initial benchmarks show ATI 's upcoming card to be faster than Nvidia's, and the new card from Matrox, while a shade slower, features some very cool sounding anti-aliasing features and multi-monitor support. Because of 3D card competition and Xbox weakness, Nvidia's share price is down 87% since January.

Nonetheless, I predict Nvidia wins this battle, at least over the next 12 months. ATI has often shown fast chips before, but poor drivers, subtle bugs, and production ramp up issues have prevented them from translating this speed into market dominance. Every few years, Matrox reappears with a technically interesting chip, but then doesn't follow through with rapid successor chips of escalating speed. Meanwhile, with massive support from the development and gamer communities, and proven consistency in manufacturing and driver support, NVidia has won its past battles, and will win this one, too.

**Xbox Loses:** Microsoft committed two fatal errors with the Xbox. First, it designed in an expensive hard drive that adds very little to gameplay and introduces fear among consumers about mechanical failure, viruses, and the like. The hard drive will prevent Microsoft from being as aggressive on pricing as it should be, and even with recent drops, the big M is losing a bundle on each Xbox sold. Second, with over $20 billion in cash in the bank, Microsoft nonetheless failed to purchase a single major console publisher to ensure exclusive games for their system. With no "must-have" games this Christmas to compete with the PS2's next *Grand Theft Auto* and *Tomb Raider*, and Nintendo's *Mario*, *Zelda*, and *Metroid*, Xbox will clearly slide into third place over the Christmas season, and enter into a slow Dreamcast-death spiral.

**Consoles' Internet Platforms Don't Catch On:** Supposedly, the next big wave for consoles is Internet connectivity. All three consoles makers have big Internet plans for this Christmas, but I just don't see very many console gamers going through the struggle of hooking up their box to the Internet. Most people don't even have a phone jack behind their TV/console, much less the broadband connection they'll need for serious gaming. With no compelling content, no keyboard and mouse, and no hard drive (except the struggling Xbox), there's little to be gained by hooking a console to the Internet. If you want to play online role-playing games, shooters, or any other 'net driven games, the PC will remain the only viable platform.

**PC Resurgence Begins:** With the Xbox fading and the PS 2 technology showing its age, PC games will have noticeably better graphics than consoles. Ubiquitous Internet connections on PCs—many using broadband—will add to the PC's gaming advantage. As much as I've complained in the past about poor implementation of 3D on the PC, I think this will improve as game makers release second and third generation 3D games. As consumers start to replace the cheapo Internet PCs they bought in 1998 and 1999, they'll appreciate the cool new games they can play on modern systems. *WarCraft III*, *Doom III*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *The Sims Online*, *Age of Mythology*—that's the kind of exclusive content that will start the PC resurgence. This trend will pick up even more speed the following year.

**Small Publishers Disappear:** As the industry consolidates, what rationale exists for publishers like 3DO, Eidos, Infogrames, Interplay, and Strategy First? Three of those five will be gone by this time next year. In general, there will be fewer, bigger publishers, funding fewer, more expensive titles. There will still be room for $19.95 low-budget titles, developed in Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland, but the mid-budget games from mid-budget publishers (titles like *X-COM*, *Master of Orion*, and *Total Annihilation*) will become more scarce.

**Duke Nukem Forever Ships:** Hey, every set of predictions has to contain at least one pie-in-the-sky long shot. ●

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TOM CHICK

# THREE finger salute

## beyond belief

### Of flight sims and raw deals

**Last night I** was watching *Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction?*, the show that presents several stories and then reveals the one that's true. This weeks' episode was "Strange E-mail from Strategy First." Here were the choices:

1. "The release of *Strike Fighters* that everyone is talking about is a limited commercial release, special only to one specific retailer, and is *not* a beta copy as some have insinuated. The release is a 'basic version' that is targeted towards that specific retailer's audience. We admit that we have discovered more bugs than we thought and we are fixing them as quickly as we can and a patch will be released in the coming weeks. The next release, which is the 'fully featured' version, will be released in October. Those who have bought the 'basic version' will be able to upgrade to the 'fully featured' release for free."

> "...Earth 2150: Lost Souls is not a reference to the people who bought the limited commercial release and can't get it to run."

2. "The release of *O.R.B.* that everyone is talking about is a limited commercial release. To avoid confusion with the 'fully featured' release, we will change the name to *H.E.M.I.S.P.H.E.R.E.* The name will revert to *O.R.B.* when the game goes gold. Also, the limited commercial release of *G.I. Combat: Episode 1: Normandy* will be called *G.I. Combat: Episode 0.5: Waiting in England for the Weather to Clear.*"

3. "Strategy First is pleased to announce the limited commercial release of *Jagged Alliance 2: Gold Pack*, which we will be publishing as a 'fully featured' version later this year. Since the game has been finished for quite some time and we're just re-releasing it, we have made special arrangements with the developers to disable the AI, add some placeholder artwork, and remove the campaign specially for the limited commercial release."

4. "The subtitle of *Earth 2150: Lost Souls* is *not* a reference to the people who bought the limited commercial release and can't get it to run."

5. "Strategy First is pleased to announce something that hasn't happened yet. As soon as it happens, look for a fully featured press release."

The correct answer was A, which is the only actual email from Strategy First. All the rest were fabrications! And I had no idea *Strike Fighters* was a limited commercial release. I just thought it was a bad flight sim.

Then I got to wondering what other great deals you might find at "specific retailers" such as Wal-Mart, the only store privy to the limited commercial release of *Strike Fighters*. Since I don't really need a hunting rifle, a full-screen version of the *Lord of the Rings* DVD, or a cheap mop, I haven't been to Wal-Mart in a while. So I decided to drop by and see what I was missing. However, I couldn't find anything that said "limited commercial release" or "basic version." The store was lousy with fully-featured versions of stuff.

Perhaps Strategy First is pioneering limited commercial releases. But then I noticed that even the box for its *Strike Fighters* didn't boast any claims of being a limited commercial release. What's going on here? You'd think they'd want people to know what a bargain they're getting by having exclusive access to a limited release. I just don't understand, which explains why I didn't correctly guess the actual Strategy First email on *Beyond Belief*.

As I was on my way out, I decided I was hungry, so I went into the little cafe at the front of the store. I ordered a cheeseburger, which was prominently featured in a backlit picture over the counter.

"I'd like the cheeseburger," I said, pointing at the picture.

"Right this way, sir," the kid behind the counter said, waving me into a back room. There was a cow in the room.

"Is that a cow?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

"No sir, it's a cheeseburger. The butcher and milk maid will be in next week, at which point you can pick up your fully featured cheeseburger. But for now, you can take a bite out of the cow's ass and we'll squirt a shot of milk into your mouth straight from her teat. We call it our limited commercial release cheeseburger."

I'm still recovering from the salmonella, just like I'm still waiting on the *Strike Fighters* upgrade. But in the meantime, I have the privilege of being a part of limited commercial releases. ●

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